



# STUART PALMER

A  
HILDEGARDE  
WITHERS  
MYSTERY



*The*  
Green Ace



A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK



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# **The Green Ace**

## **A Hildegarde Withers Mystery**

**Stuart Palmer**



MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM



INTEGRATED MEDIA

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“Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out.”  
—*John Webster*

IF THERE ARE EVER nights for murder, this was one. All through the previous day a blazing August sun had blasted Manhattan's concrete anthill, and now in the early morning walls and pavements still radiated the heat, baking hapless inhabitants in their damp wrinkled beds. Even on Staten Island, that queer lost borough of New York City which except for the turgid ditch called the Kill van Kull would properly have been part of New Jersey, the heat lay like a solid but invisible sweatshirt over the land.

On such a night tempers wear thin. There is an unexplored link between variations in the temperature curve and the murder index. In certain parts of southern Europe there are laws still extant on the statute books which forbid indictments for capital crimes committed during the time of the *mistral*, that hot searing wind off the wastes of the Sahara. History tells us that it was a stifling summer day when Lizzie Borden took her famous ax in hand, a steaming June morning when Joseph Elwell, the bridge expert and aging gallant, got a bullet through his bald head, and a sultry Fourth of July when Augusta Nack cut up the romantically tattooed Willie Guldensuppe. And so on and so on.

At three o'clock Saturday morning Hylan Avenue, lifeline of Staten Island, was lonely and deserted except for a blue sedan, headed south a little faster than the law allows. At that hour, in the sparse traffic of the suburbs, such infractions are usually winked at. But Lady Luck is a woman, and as Porgy used to sing, "A woman is a sometime thing." It happened that the car whisked past two police officers just as they came out of an owl restaurant full of Denver sandwiches, coffee, and renewed zeal. They watched it ignore the stop-signal at the corner of New Drop and spin left toward the lonely Atlantic beaches.

So the officers threw away their toothpicks and took off after it in the prowler car, with one brief wolf-wail of the siren. As they drew alongside their red spotlight cast a bloody glow over the lone man at the wheel, who obediently cut his speed and pulled sharply over to the curb. But then instead of hitting his brakes he let the big Buick coast slowly along until it smashed into the rear of a parked delivery truck, with a musical tinkle of headlight glass. The officers had only intended to give the driver a warning and send him on his way, but now a ticket was indicated—a ticket and a minor accident report.

But he was slumped down behind the wheel, with nothing to say for himself. A flashlight in his face disclosed a handsome, slight fellow of around thirty, whose eyeballs had rolled upward so that only the whites were showing. He had fainted dead away; “Wilted like a lily,” was the policemen’s phrase.

The officers were no great shakes at investigation, or else they wouldn’t have been cruising a bicycle-beat in uniform, but they soon discovered that there was something crammed against the back seat of the Buick, under an old army blanket. At first they took it for a store-window dummy, so white and waxen and artificial it was. Then they realized that window dummies come apart at the shoulders and waist, they do not bend their long legs up jackknife fashion. The pale flesh under the cop’s exploring hand was clammy, and he jerked back as if he had touched a hot stove.

“A dame!” he whispered. “A great big dead beautiful naked dame!”

His partner shook the driver’s shoulder. “Wake up, bud, we want to talk to you.” It was the prize understatement of the week.

Behind the wheel Andy Rowan moaned in the grip of a nightmare. They brought him back to consciousness, but the nightmare went on. It went on for over a year.



“Who can refute a sneer?”  
—*William Paley*

# 1.

THE JOKER IN ANDREW Rowan’s last will and testament, a document witnessed by the prison chaplain and one Paul Huff, keeper in the death-house, was supposed to be a secret. But there are few secrets long kept from the warden at Sing Sing. That earnest official got wind of it through the prison grapevine, swore efficiently if a bit rustily, and then put through a long distance call to Centre Street, which happens to be the headquarters of the New York police department.

Inspector Oscar Piper, grizzled and long-suffering skipper of the homicide bureau, muttered incoherent thanks for the tip-off and then crashed his desk phone into its cradle and yelled, “Judas Priest in a mixmaster, why does *everything* have to happen to me?”

He was talking to himself, but at that singularly inauspicious moment a certain spinster schoolma’am crashed the gates of his private office on business connected with the sale of tickets to a charity bazaar for the Fresh-Air Fund, and from his last words drew a natural but quite erroneous conclusion. “Oscar!” cried Miss Hildegard Withers indignantly, “will you never tire of casting rude aspersions at my taste in hats?”

The Inspector looked up at his old friend and erstwhile sparring-partner without welcome or warmth. He could have said with some reason that the bonnet she wore today appeared to have had old fruit and vegetables cast at it already, but at the moment he was in no mood for badinage. “Oh, it’s you again!” he said, shoulders sagging. “Whatever’s on your mind I don’t want any. Goodbye *please!*”

But Miss Withers sat down anyway. From her long and sometimes stormy association with Oscar Piper she knew that like most conscientious policemen the Inspector usually had a case of the jitters during the last days of anyone he had helped send up the river on sentence of death. “Ah!” she cried. “Something tells me you’re fretting about the Harrington case again. Too bad Rowan isn’t obliging enough to make a last-minute confession and set your mind at rest.”

“*Confession?*” Piper winced as from a probe at an ulcerated tooth. “He made a will instead! The warden just phoned and broke the news. Somehow Rowan’s managed to hang onto \$3500 that I guess his defense lawyers didn’t find out about, and he’s leaving it to *me!*”

“What a nice gesture!” Then Miss Withers’ gray-blue eyes narrowed. “Or is he trying to heap coals of fire on your head, perhaps?”

“More like a red-hot poker—but never mind. There’s a stipulation in the will that I use the money, after he’s dead of course, to make a *full and impartial* investigation of the murder for which he is being *unjustly* executed.”

She smiled wryly. “Chickens will come home to roost, won’t they, Oscar?”

Savagely the Inspector ground out a new, unlighted perfecto. “And when Andy Rowan pays his debt to society the week of the twentieth that screwball will go to probate, and leave it to somebody to break the details to the reporters. Maybe you can guess what certain newspapers will make of the story.”

Miss Withers nodded. “*Read all abaht it! Rowan with Dying Gasp Bribes Police for Fair Play.* I see the point.” Then her eyes nicked toward the wall calendar, brightening. “But, Oscar, thanks to the warden’s warning, there’s still time! You have almost nine days before Rowan walks that long last mile through the little green door to the hot-sit.”

“*Hot-squat!*” he corrected her wearily. “And there hasn’t been a little green door in the condemned block for years. Also, what do you mean I still have nine days? Nine days for what? Reopening the case wouldn’t bring out anything new. Besides, I’d have to tell the Commish my reasons, and I’d almost rather die first.”

“You mean you’d almost rather Rowan died first, guilty or not.”

But Piper wasn’t listening. “Why does the fellow take it out on me anyway? Why doesn’t he blame the jury that convicted him, or the judge, or the district attorney? I’m only a cop doing my job. I collect evidence and make arrests, that’s all.” The Inspector sighed, and mopped his brow.

“I know, Oscar. But now we really must consider the possibility that there is more to this business of the will than just an attempt at a sneaky posthumous revenge against the one person Rowan rightly or wrongly blames for his conviction. Just suppose for a moment that the man is really innocent.”

“Suppose my foot! Let’s not start that again. Rowan is guilty as hell.”

“Perhaps so,” the schoolteacher came back, frowning a little. “But there is always the possibility, however remote, of a miscarriage of justice. After all, the implication in the man’s making this unorthodox disposition of his money is that there’s a needle in the woodpile somewhere. Aren’t you going up to Sing Sing and have a talk with him at least?”

“Nothing of the kind. Rowan isn’t talking because he doesn’t dare to. Somewhere in the files we’ve got the 16-millimeter sound film we shot of him the morning he was arrested—we all thought he was going to confess, and wanted proof that he hadn’t been worked over in case he tried to repudiate the confession later. You ought to see it, he squirms and wriggles under the lights, and then clams up like a—”

“Like a clam? I can imagine, with all of you policemen shouting at him.”

“Relax, Hildegard! Rowan quit talking because there was one question he couldn’t answer then or since. It’s this—if he didn’t murder the Harrington girl, then why was he driving around half the night with a shovel and her dead body hidden in the back of his car?”

“Circumstantial evidence!” snapped Miss Withers. “Thoreau’s ‘trout in the milk.’ But couldn’t it have been planted there?”

“Are you daffy? They don’t plant trout in milk, they—”

“Please don’t be intentionally dense. I mean, of course, that the girl’s body could have been hidden in Rowan’s car by some person or persons unknown, for their own fell purposes.”

“No dice, Hildegard,” he said with weary gentleness. “Stop trying to set yourself up as a citizens’ committee of one, will you? The police are only human and we make mistakes, but not about an open-and-shut case like this one. Listen a minute. The thing happened when you were away on your vacation last summer, so you missed most of it. Andy Rowan was a former hack newspaperman turned press-agent—one of those smooth, glib-talking boys who hang around Sardi’s and Shubert Alley and Bleeck’s. Midge Harrington was his client, a big glamazon who was supposed to be getting the full treatment. She was trying, with the backing of some businessmen’s booster club out in her native Flatbush, for the Miss Brooklyn crown and a try at Atlantic City and the big Miss America splash later. It was Rowan’s job to get her name in the papers and her face and

gams in the picture weeklies. But Midge was a luscious hunk of stuff, with a pair of big round—”

“Oscar!”

“I was about to say, with a pair of big round heels. Nicely packaged goods, however. Pretty soon Midge and Andy were putting in a good deal of overtime, sometimes in the Stork and El Morocco and Pierre’s and sometimes at his wife’s town house up on Prospect Way, which was supposedly closed for the summer. I don’t suppose they spent the long summer evenings bringing her scrapbooks up to date or playing canasta. But Andy got tired first—”

“Someone said, Oscar, that the tragedy of love is that two people never fall out of it at the same time. Not, of course, that I’ve had much personal experience.”

He grinned. “Yeah, like in the song about the Strawberry Roan, they went up together and came down alone. About that time the beauty-queen campaign went haywire, which wouldn’t make Midge any sunnier in the disposition. She was probably putting the screws to Rowan, trying to get him to elope with her and threatening to go to his wife and spill the beans if he didn’t keep his promises. It was the simple case of a guy not wanting to lose his meal-ticket—his wife was a rich widow when he married her, and the straitlaced type to boot.”

“By the way, I seem to remember that she didn’t stand by Andy at the trial?”

“Can you blame her? It must have been a considerable shock to find that her handsome young husband had been playing boomspsadaisy with a large economy-size blonde from Flatbush. When Natalie met and married Andy Rowan in Paris a few years after the war she was on an all-expense luxury tour and he had just been fired from a minor job with a foreign press bureau. She brought him home and put up the dough for his lush public-relations office over in the Chrysler Building. Hell hath no fury like a woman who’s been made a fool of.”

“Things aren’t always that simple.” Miss Withers craned her long neck, studying the papers spread out on the Inspector’s battered old oak desk. “Oscar, I notice that even before you heard from the warden something had impelled you to dig out the official file on this case, so you must have had an inner twinge or two of doubt.” She moved around beside him, and picked up a photo. “Andy Rowan’s a rather good-looking boy,

even in this awful police picture. The mouth may be a little weak, but the eyes are nice ...”

“Women!” exploded Oscar Piper. “I suppose a guy with nice curly hair and dimples can’t be just as guilty as the next one?”

But she was skimming over the medical examiner’s report. “Dead on arrival ... asphyxia and hyoid fracture ... well-nourished white female, identified as Midge Harrington, 18, showgirl and dancer ... address Rehearsal Arts Club ... by roommate Iris Dunn, 22, actress. No identifying scars, weight 156, height 5-11 ... My, Oscar, she was a big girl for her age, wasn’t she?”

The Inspector nodded. “Yes, she outweighed Rowan, who was a dapper little squirt. Probably she could have taken him in a fair fight. But she never had a chance. We figure it was a sort of sneak punch. When he met Midge at his wife’s house that night he probably staged a fake reconciliation and then unwrapped the necklace as a peace offering. If he stood behind her to clasp it around her neck, the way a man does at a moment like that ...”

“Why, Oscar!” cried Miss Withers, “I had no idea that you knew about such niceties. I’d have been willing to wager that even in your palmiest days you never gave a girl anything more than a pound box of candy, and then stuck around until the last gumdrop was finished.”

“Okay, okay. Anyway, that’s our reconstruction of how the murder occurred. With the necklace held tight around her neck, all Rowan had to do was to give just one hard jerk and it was all over, curtains.” The Inspector riffled through the file and picked up another photograph. “Here, take a look at this and maybe you won’t feel such a rush of motherly sympathy for poor Andy Rowan.”

Miss Withers found herself staring at an enlarged close-up of the dead girl, obviously taken on a slab in the morgue, all wild hair and glaring eyes. She gulped, and then cocked her head curiously. “Oscar, that thing around her neck—?”

“That’s not the murder weapon, just the stigmata it made. The necklace left an indelible mark in the tissues, four dots and a lozenge and so on. We know from this photo what it must have probably looked like.”

“But you never succeeded in finding out where Rowan acquired it?”

“That we did not. But that sort of costume jewelry, *brummagen* is the trade name for it, is sold in half the stores in New York. You can’t often

trace anything like that, the shopgirls sell too many of them. Anyway, *not* finding how he got it was about the only weak link in the chain of evidence.”

“And you didn’t find the necklace afterward, either?”

“We figure he simply dropped it off the ferryboat, along with her clothes, on the way to Staten Island. You can’t drag the whole Upper Bay. He probably wanted to drop the body too, but found too many people aboard who’d have heard that big a splash. He was picked up just half a mile from Midland Beach, you know. If he hadn’t passed that stop sign he’d probably have dug a nice grave for Midge in the sand somewhere, and maybe we wouldn’t have found her yet.”

“It all sounds very damning, almost too damning.” The schoolteacher stood up and crossed the room to stare intently at the view from the window, which gave onto a brick wall a dozen feet away. She said, “All the same, I’d like a talk with Rowan.”

“A talk in the death-house?” Piper thought that was funny. “Nobody but his wife or his lawyers could get in there, and they’ve all long since washed their hands of him. He’s as good as dead already, now that the appeal has failed. The Governor has intimated that he isn’t going to take any action, not with the public up in arms about the nationwide wave of crimes against women and children. Besides, suppose you did get to Rowan? What do you think an amateur snoop could worm out of him at this late date that trained detectives missed?”

“There’s such a thing as being overtrained! I confess now that I’ve always had certain doubts about the Harrington case just from what I’ve read about it. Suppose Rowan is innocent, as his writing that kind of will clearly indicates? Justice is justice, and on top of that I hate to see your hide nailed to the barn door by the yellow press. Perhaps Mrs. Rowan can be induced to help. What’s her address, Oscar?”

“Still 144 Prospect Way, as far as I know. But Hildegarde—”

“I know. I promised not to meddle any more, but this is a serious situation. I simply must take steps to save you in spite of yourself from an awful mistake!”

“Oh, *no!*” cried the Inspector, feeling that the cure would be worse than the disease. So many of Miss Withers’ well-meant attempts at assisting him in the past had backfired that he hastily leaped to his feet, saying, “Hildegarde, wait a minute!”

“Like time and tide, I wait for no man,” she called over her shoulder. She was gone, leaving behind only a faint odor of soap, violet sec, and chalk dust.

Letting as usual no grass whatever grow under her stoutly clad feet, Miss Withers was soon hammering on the door of a big solid red-brick house overlooking Riverside Drive and the looming geometry of the George Washington Bridge. At first glance there was nothing here, even to her active imagination, to suggest that the place had ever been associated with murder and sudden death. The lawn was well kept, the shrubbery trimmed. But the windows were streaked and dusty, with drawn blinds, and no one answered her knock. Finally she started resolutely around to the rear, and almost stumbled over a fading sign stuck in the side lawn: “FOR IMMEDIATE SALE OR TRADE, Digby and Sons” ...

She rounded the corner of the house, almost plunging into the brown and brittle tangle that had been a rose garden, and stopped short. A young man in a leather jacket was just letting himself out of the kitchen door—a tallish, weedy young man who started visibly when he saw her approach.

“One moment!” cried Miss Withers. “Young man, if you’re from the real estate brokers I’d like a chance to view the house.”

“Real estate?” he said blankly, in a cultured voice that was a cut or two above his extremely casual clothes. “I don’t understand.”

“The house is for sale, isn’t it? I’d like to look at it, and I want to get in touch with the owner.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you,” he said. “Sorry.” And he started off.

“But if you’re *not* from the realtor’s, then who are you?”

“Gas man,” he told her. “Just reading the meter.” And he was gone.

Miss Withers hammered on the back door, without much hope. She even tried the knob, but it was locked. There were French doors opening out onto a sort of raised sun porch, but every blind was drawn. Finally she gave it up and went away.

A telephone call to the real estate office produced only the information that they did not have the address of any Mrs. Andrew Rowan or Mrs. Natalie Rowan, nor had the girl at the switchboard ever heard of her. The telephone book and city directory, were equally of no help whatever.

“I might have known!” observed the disappointed school-ma’am to herself as she left the phone booth. Mrs. Natalie Rowan had probably put her house up for sale through an intermediary and then taken herself off to

some playground of the idle rich such as Bar Harbor or Santa Barbara, there to try to forget the unpleasant ceremony scheduled for the week of the twentieth. One could hardly blame her, under the circumstances, for wanting to be as far as possible from the last act of this sorry tragedy and all its attendant publicity. Still Miss Withers thought it would have been very helpful for her to know exactly where Natalie Rowan was, and just what if anything she was up to ...

Shortly before noon next day—Sunday—a limousine with uniformed driver pulled up outside dreary prison walls to disgorge a tall and expensive woman wearing bright yellow hair, an imposing mink jacket, and several diamond bracelets. She marched up to the entrance gate and demanded to see Andrew Rowan. In the face of the guard's weary announcement that visiting hours were from two to four every second Wednesday, she pointed out that there would be little or no use in her returning next visiting day to pay a call on a dead husband. It was a point well taken. The gate guard made a telephone call and finally the visitor was permitted to enter, though not until she had come to the conclusion that Sing Sing is almost as hard to get into as out of.

Then she ran into a uniformed matron, who said firmly, "If you'll just step in here, Mrs. Rowan? There are certain formalities."

"Of course! I'm to be frisked or whatever you call it to make sure that I haven't a saw or a file concealed on my person, to pass through the grating ..."

The matron's smile was grim. "No danger of that, ma'am. You'll see your husband through a glass barrier, and speak with a microphone. We're not worried about such nonsense as saws and files, but we do keep a sharp look out for cameras." The search was performed briskly and competently, with amazing thoroughness. Of course, some cameras these days were made very small, but still—

The visitor cooled her high heels in an anteroom for half an hour and then was led through a maze of corridors and finally ushered into a long hall split in half by a low table, with a dozen or so armchairs facing on either side. The table was divided by a heavy wire-inforced glass that ran clear to the ceiling. Everything was spotlessly clean, smelling of brown soap and lysol, but the stench of human shame and misery hung heavy in the air.



A wooden-faced guard sat overlooking the room from a raised armchair at one end; two more stood by the iron door in the opposite wall through which a man in shapeless prison gray was coming. It must be Andy Rowan—or what was left of him. Yet there was little or nothing about him to remind anyone of the handsome young chap who had fainted behind the wheel of the blue Buick or who had posed for the police photographs; his curly hair was cropped short and his drawn face was all nose and chin and staring eyes. As he was led forward he watched the floor, as if afraid of stumbling over an invisible obstacle.

The keeper in charge of him, a burly fellow with tight gray waves in his hair, was more alert. Without warning he caught the prisoner's arm, turned him around, and headed him back toward the iron door again—a round trip to nowhere. So near, and yet so far. Then, after the door had clanged on Andy Rowan again, the keeper briskly crossed the room, unlocked a panel in the dividing wall, and came through to the disappointed visitor.

“Mrs. Rowan?” He smiled professionally. “I’m sorry, there’s been a little mistake. You’re supposed to be cleared through the warden’s office for an interview with your husband when it isn’t a regular visiting day. If you’ll only come this way I’m sure it can all be ironed out in a few minutes.”

She started to protest, looking wistfully back over her shoulder. But the keeper’s hand was gripping her arm in that oily familiarity which becomes second nature to most men who are given the power of lock and key over their fellows. His knowing eyes and unctuous smile implied that there was some sort of unsavory understanding between them, some common secret. She twisted away, but they went back again, through more and more corridors and up a stair, where she finally sat alone in a bare waiting room for a little while and then at last was ushered into a suite of offices overlooking the prison yard. Her escort left her there, and she went forward alone toward where a man was standing—a quiet, grayish person in tweeds, with deep worry lines etched across his forehead and caliper grooves from nose to mouth.

Indicating a chair, he said, “Mrs. Rowan? Sit down, please. I’m Warden Boyington.”

“How do you do?” she said a little weakly, as she refused a proffered cigarette.

“May I say, Mrs. Rowan, that you don’t look quite as I expected?”

“Oh yes, yes of course!” She even managed a wavering smile. “I *am* a little older than my poor husband, but—”

The warden held a gold lighter to his own cigarette. “I didn’t mean that. You seem,” he went on gently, “to have aged considerably, and also to have grown some three or four inches taller, since you were up here a couple of weeks ago.”

“But—why, naturally I’ve been sick with worry, and perhaps I’m not looking my best. And these high heels I’m wearing ...” She stopped, and there was a long uncomfortable silence. Then Miss Hildegarde Withers hitched up her diamond bracelets and said, “Well, warden, it was worth trying anyway!”

Warden Boyington suddenly hit his desk so hard that all its accumulation of pens and little ornaments and vases of flowers leaped up into the air and did a little samba dance. “Damn it to hell, ma’am, I hate reporters!”

“But warden—”

“You’re under arrest. Now laugh that off.”

“Man, a hybrid of plant and ghost.”  
—*Nietzsche*

## 2.

LAUGHTER WAS AT THAT moment farthest from Miss Wither's thoughts. There were a number of things she would have liked to say, but the warden wasn't giving her the chance. "It's time one of you people had a lesson," he remarked with some bitterness. "Once, before my term of office, a reporter sneaked a camera into the execution chamber, and next day the world was edified by a portrait of Ruth Snyder when the current scorched her. I suppose, ma'am, you thought it would be an equally smart scoop to get a sob-sister interview with a man in the condemned block by pretending to be his wife. You might just possibly have got away with it, if Keeper Huff hadn't been on his toes."

Miss Withers hastily took in sail and ran her true colors up to the masthead, only it turned out that the warden didn't like amateur detectives either! "But warden, just suppose this man Rowan is really innocent," she demanded during the next lull.

Warden Boyington looked at her with ill-concealed aversion. "They're *all* innocent, to hear them tell it. We've hardly ever had a convict in this place who didn't claim he was framed. Every man in the condemned block sits day after day puzzling over law books and trying out writs and briefs and appeals, figuring that the rest of his mates will have to die but *he's* different. I tell you—"

"Tell me this," she said. "Rowan has been up here almost six months. You must know him, must have talked to him. Does he impress you as a guilty man?"

The warden shrugged. "How would I know? We've never had an 'innocent' man in the condemned cells, to my knowledge. They're as good as dead when they go in. I'll admit Rowan is confident, or claims to be, that some miracle will save him, but that's not uncommon."

"Only that odd will he made—"

"How'd you get wind of *that*?" Warden Boyington hit his desk again. "If Huff let that out of the bag—"

She shook her head. "I can't reveal my sources of information."

“Well, I’ll reveal something to you. It is my unpleasant duty to inform you that it’s a misdemeanor to enter a state prison under false pretenses, and a felony to forge a false name in the visitors’ book. Let’s see you fast-talk your way out of that!”

Miss Withers closed her eyes, having a clear vision of months in a dungeon cell on dry bread and water, surrounded by large slimy rats. As a desperate last resort she had to swallow what was left of her pride and implore the man to check on her bona fides with a long distance call to Spring 7-3100. “You can even reverse the charges,” she offered hopefully as a clincher.

It took some persuading, but finally Warden Boyington put through the call. He listened, relaxed a little, and then passed the instrument across the desk to her. After it was all over he painstakingly hung up the phone again and silently indicated the door. So it was with her ears still burning from the Inspector’s caustic “I told you so!” that Miss Withers gathered together her borrowed and rented finery, clinging to what little dignity was left to her.

Yet she could not resist one last attempt. “Warden,” she said, “as man to man, tell me what you think about that last will and testament of Andrew Rowan’s!”

“I think it’s a practical joke, that’s what I think! Men in the condemned row sometimes develop an odd sense of humor. They love to send comic valentines and doggerel poetry, sometimes to me and sometimes to the police or the district attorney or whoever on the outside they blame for their being here. There’s the old unfunny gag about the convict who had one last little request as they led him to the chair—he said he wanted the warden to sit on his lap.”

She frowned. “And how would you feel about executing an innocent man?”

“I wouldn’t feel any different. I’m only a servant of the people, carrying out orders of the court. Personally I am opposed to capital punishment, and my wife sneaks sedatives in my coffee at dinner every day we have an execution. But I’m not an individual, I’m an instrument.”

“Monsieur de Paris at least wore a black mask!” snapped the schoolteacher, and stalked out of the place.

“Almost!” she sighed dismally to herself as the gates clanged. But *almost* was to no avail, *almost* was but to fail. And with the one question she had wanted to ask Andy Rowan still unanswered. Eight days from now

he might not be alive to answer it. She had no very clear idea of what “the week of September twentieth” really meant, of whether they executed a man on Monday or kept him around until the following Sunday night, but to all intents and purposes it worked out the same. Judging by the progress she had made so far, Rowan would surely die for the Harrington girl’s murder—and the Inspector, the only man in her life even though she detested him one day and mothered him the next, would be pilloried in the press when the news of the will got out.

Immediately after a murder the press was always crying for the blood of the fiend who had perpetrated it, but after somebody had been found guilty and sentenced to death the papers were equally avid to reopen the story with a suggestion that an innocent man had been crushed under the Juggernaut of Justice. And this time, the exception that proves the rule, it might very well be true.

Somewhat baffled, the schoolteacher suffered herself to be borne back to Manhattan in her hired limousine. Then, as they went through the outskirts of Yonkers, she suddenly cried aloud, “Of all the unmitigated *idiots!*”

The driver, having just won a narrow victory in a brush with a truck trying to make a left turn, turned an irate face. “What was that crack, lady?”

“Not you—me!” Miss Withers said hastily. “I forgot about the *money!*”

Which naturally made the man leap to the conclusion that she was trying to get the charges put on the cuff. But the schoolteacher paid him off, adding a very modest tip, outside her little apartment on West 74th, and then rushed inside to divest herself of her borrowed plumage and to make peace with Talleyrand, her French poodle. Talley was a gregarious canine, He liked regular meals and more than food he liked companionship, both of which had been denied him all day long. He welcomed her as one returned from the dead, then rushed to open the closet door. It was one of his self-taught tricks, and he had to turn the knob very carefully with his teeth, but he came triumphantly galumphing back with his leash.

“Very well,” said the schoolteacher. “But it will be a very short walk indeed, for I have work to do. The game is afoot.”

They went once around the block, with Talleyrand pausing now and then to investigate a new smell or to grab up a scrap of secondhand chewing gum, but as they came back to the familiar steps of the brownstone his mistress paused, tapping her prominent front teeth with a fingernail. “On

second thought, perhaps you may as well come with me after all,” she decided. “Any woman anchored to a big silly apricot-colored beast like you will be taken at sight for an eccentric of the first water. Which is the exact impression I wish to convey.”

Talley vibrated what there was left of his tail, and showed an incredibly red tongue in a doggish laugh. He was a home-loving dog, but not very.

So the retired schoolteacher and her gamboling Standard poodle set out on the quest. It was a search filled with ups and downs, and required the pulling of many strings and the taking of certain liberties with the truth, but she eventually discovered that the present owner of the house on Prospect Way was a Mrs. Emil Fogel. There was a very slim chance indeed that she would have any information about the previous owner, but it was worth a try. At ten o’clock next morning Miss Hildegard Withers, still complete with dog, went out by appointment to see about buying a house.

The shades were still drawn, the windows still unwashed, but this time the door opened at her first knock. There stood a shapely girl in slacks, whose sultry mouth and bright strawberry hair suggested that somewhere farther downtown, perhaps Times Square, would have been her more natural habitat,

“You’re Mrs. Fogel?” demanded the schoolteacher.

“She couldn’t make it,” the girl said. “I’m her secretary-companion.” She looked dubiously down at Talley, who was straining at the leash and curling a black lip to bare one gleaming fang. “Does it bite?” Miss Withers told her of course not. “But it looks as if he’s snarling.”

“Nonsense, child, he’s only chewing leftover gum again. A terrible habit, but I’m thankful he hasn’t found out about tobacco. So Mrs. Fogel couldn’t keep the appointment, after all? I guess she isn’t very anxious to sell the property.”

“Oh, but she is! I can give you all the details—”

Miss Withers had already infiltrated the front hallway, furnished sparingly with a telephone table, a hard bench, and an ancient upright victrola, *circa* 1910. It was but a step past heavy draperies into the big living room, whose French doors would have looked out into the garden if the blinds had been opened. The girl touched a switch and a bowl-shaped chandelier glowed feebly overhead. It was a somber room, filled with ponderous overstuffed chairs and fumed-oak tables, and the gilt-framed

portrait on one wall of a scowling man with a toothbrush moustache did not brighten it.

“The asking price is \$28,000-\$30,000 if you take furniture and all.”

“I see,” said Miss Withers, casually ruffling the poodle’s silky top-knot. “But isn’t that a little high? Shouldn’t there be some reduction because of the possibility of the place being haunted? There was a very gruesome murder committed here last year, you know.”

The young woman winced, as if somebody had hit a very sour chord on a piano. Then she said, too quickly, “Oh, *was* there? I hadn’t heard.”

“But surely the present owner must have heard? Perhaps that’s why she’s so anxious to sell?”

“Yes, but—Mrs. Fogel’s only owned the place a short time, and—”

“Fiddlesticks. That ‘For Sale’ sign on the lawn has been weathering there too long for the house to have changed owners very recently. And someone is living here right now, even though the door isn’t opened except by appointment.”

“But Mrs. Fogel—”

“Suppose we stop playing games, and call her by her real name. Mrs. Fogel wouldn’t have any reason for hiding out, but Natalie Rowan might. Ask Mrs. *Rowan* to step in please!”

It was a direct hit, on target. The young eyes were wide as saucers.

“But Mrs. Rowan isn’t—I mean Mrs. *Fogel* isn’t seeing anyone, I mean—”

“You little fool, you don’t know what you mean!” interrupted a hoarse feminine voice from the hallway. The woman who abruptly pushed through the draperies was somewhere in her early forties, though her eyes were older. She was handsome still, yet there was something about her that suggested a comely turtle, a turtle vulnerable and trying hard to pretend it hadn’t been pried out of its shell. She said, “Iris, well excuse you!”

Iris hesitated, shrugged her firm young shoulders, and then walked out of the room in a reasonably good imitation of Miss Tallulah Bankhead making an exit from a stage overcrowded with bit players.

Natalie Rowan said firmly, “I really have no statement whatever for the press.” She pointedly did not sit down.

Miss Withers found that in spite of herself she liked the woman. She was always drawn to lame dogs and beggars, and here was a soul in desperate trouble but keeping a stiff upper lip. Besides, it was a little flattering to be taken for a member of the Fourth Estate. “Goodness, I’m not

a reporter,” confessed the dowdy middle-aged schoolma’am. “Though I’m being mistaken for one so often these days I’m beginning to think I should take out a card in the Newspaper Guild. Mrs. Rowan—”

“And if you don’t mind, I prefer to use the name of my first husband at this time. To avoid as much unpleasant notoriety as possible. You cannot imagine how heartless the photographers and so on can be!”

For all her assurance, the woman was tense and afraid; pulled up taut as an E-string. But Miss Withers was already over her quota on mercy that day. “Never mind your first husband,” she probed briskly. “Your present husband has barely seven more days to live.”

Another hit, below the belt. Twisting her rings, Natalie whispered, “And—and just what is that to you?”

“I’m glad you asked me that question,” said the schoolteacher with a wry smile. “Because I’ve been asking it of myself for some time, without finding an answer. However, there’s always this. Shouldn’t any good citizen be interested in preventing a possible miscarriage of justice, especially when the regularly constituted authorities are simply sitting around like bumps on a log?”

It was all a little over Natalie’s head. “You’re *not* from the police, then?”

“Far from them indeed at the moment,” said Miss Withers with a disarming frankness. “Though I am perfectly willing to admit that I may have been of some slight assistance to Inspector Piper once or twice in the past.” The schoolteacher introduced herself, and gave a rather sketchy explanation of how she had come to be interested in the affair. She even went so far as to mention the will.

“Andy did *that*?” cried the woman blankly. “I don’t understand. Why didn’t he leave it to—not that I need the money at all, only—”

“Only your pride has taken a considerable beating already, is that it? Shall we forget that angle for a moment? Your husband has made a will which seems to be aimed at clearing his name of the taint of murder, posthumously. That proves he still loves you.”

“It—it does?” Natalie looked doubtful.

“Of course. He wants to have you remember him as an innocent man, as he may well be. But the time to do something about it is now, not after the execution. This is an unusual situation and requires unusual measures, of which I have a complete set or so the Inspector often tells me. To come



right down to cases, steps have to be taken—and you have to help. You can't just sit here and wash your hands of the man you married."

"Why, I—"

"And I have an idea that, even while you refused to stand by your husband at the trial, you still must have cared enough about him to pay his lawyers—or else he wouldn't have \$3500 left in his bank account after the costs of the trial and appeal. Wasn't that because you still had a sneaking fondness for him?"

The woman dropped into a chair, soft and helpless as an opened oyster. She nodded slowly. "Yes," she whispered, "I arranged for his defense. It was a firm who used to represent my first husband, Emil Fogel." Her eyes flickered toward the portrait on the wall. "He manufactured cotter pins, you know. I still think the lawyers did their best for Andy, but he was a very noncooperative client. Anyway, I did all I could for him, just as any woman would have."

"But you didn't show up to sit beside him at the trial, even though the lawyers must have told you that it might help him considerably. You kept aloof from him all through his ordeal—"

Natalie cried, in a tortured voice, "But he had told me that girl meant nothing to him, that she was only a client, and all the time—" She gulped. "All the time they were having secret trysts right here in our—in my house, where we'd been so happy!"

"My dear woman," said Miss Withers, "a man may be a liar and a philanderer, but still be innocent of murder."

There was a silence so complete that the schoolteacher could hear Talley's soft snoring beside her foot, and the ticking of a little ormolu clock across the room. Then Natalie Rowan drew a deep shuddering breath, like someone about to dive off the high board into cold water. "I *know* he's innocent," she whispered. "*Now*."

"So that's why you went up to the prison to see him? How splendid!" cried Miss Withers cheerily. "Now at long last we have something to go on. If you've run across anything in the line of proof—"

Natalie hesitated, looking across the room. "I'm afraid it isn't anything the police, or even you, would take any stock in."

"Don't be too sure," said Miss Withers, still confident. "In my time I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." Then she added, as the other woman stared at her blankly, "That's from *Alice*."

“Miss Withers, do you believe in the Hereafter?” Natalie asked suddenly.

“Why—as a member in good standing of the Parkway Unitarian Church, I suppose I must, though I couldn’t offer scientific proof of the fact.”

“I mean, do you believe in the supernormal, the supernatural as some call it?”

“Oh, come come! In this day and age, with extrasensory perception and flying saucers and H-bombs, where is one to draw the line? Please come to the point.”

“Well,” said Natalie, “since all this happened I’ve been dreadfully lonely and miserable. I tried all the isms and numerology and sedatives, but nothing seemed to help. Then a few months ago I remembered that a friend had told me about this wonderful little woman down on Ninety-sixth Street, called Marika. You must understand that she isn’t a medium or anything, no fakery about her. She just goes into trances and talks. And she doesn’t ever charge anything, though some people leave a free-will offering ...”

“Oh, *dear!*” murmured Miss Withers, feeling rather as if she had sat herself down in a chair that wasn’t there. This sort of nonsense went out with Sir Oliver Lodge and Margery of Boston and the later writings of the bemused Conan Doyle. Nowadays silly women had psychiatry and canasta and existentialism to make fools of themselves about.

Natalie looked at her almost shrewdly. “I can maybe guess what you’re thinking. But I’m not exactly the gullible type. In some of her trances Marika told me things about my childhood that she simply couldn’t have faked. There was the time with a boy on the high school sleighride—and she also told me about my honeymoon, my second one I mean. I met and married Andy in Paree, you know. Ah, the Tooleries, the Bois, the Champs d’Elysées, Longchamps ...”

“Champs, champs, champs the bois are marching,” Miss Withers said, almost aloud.

But Natalie Rowan was back on the topic of Marika again. “... and one night a few weeks ago she went into an unusually deep trance and suddenly I heard a different voice coming out of her throat. A voice that I couldn’t possibly be mistaken about, because it was Emil, my first husband. And he told me, plain as the nose on your face, that Andy *didn’t* kill the Harrington girl!”

“Oh,” said Miss Withers flatly.

“Maybe you don’t believe in voices from the Beyond? But I heard what I heard!”

The schoolteacher took it in her stride, and said, “The late Mr. Fogel would hardly be considered a pertinent witness to the murder, would he? Unless, of course, he happened to be haunting this house the evening of the murder.”

“But Marika says that the Departed are now *all* part of the Universal Mind, and know everything that ever was or will be.”

Miss Withers could have pointed out that if this were so, then it was odd that most spirit messages were on the intellectual level of an eight-year-old child. “The dear departed didn’t happen to mention the name of the real murderer?”

Natalie shook her head. “The sitting was over—Marika couldn’t stand any more.”

“And you haven’t been back for another session?”

“I—I’ve been too busy trying to help Andy.”

“I understand. But you really have nothing else, except the message from the grave, to prove your husband’s innocence?”

“Nothing except—well, I talked with him in prison. He finally admitted that his original story about finding the girl’s body planted in his car wasn’t true.”

The schoolteacher sniffled a deep sniff. “Since the police found her fingerprints all over this living room, her cigarettes in the ashtrays, and the marks on the carpet of where her heels had been dragged out of the place after she was dead, it really wasn’t much of an admission, was it?”

Natalie said quickly, “Andy’s telling the truth now, I think. But suppose I start at the beginning. It was a year ago this August, stifling hot night even up there in the country place near Darien I’d rented for the summer. Andy had been nervous and irritable at dinner, complaining about my cooking more even than usual. I wasn’t feeling well, so I went to bed early. I was half-asleep when I heard his car drive away, but I thought he was only going out for a breath of air, so I dozed off. It wasn’t until after midnight that I woke and started calling the police and hospitals. I finally decided he was out with that girl, and must have cried myself to sleep. A little before eight in the morning the maid woke me and told me that the

police were downstairs. Then I was really frantic. It was hours later when I looked into the wall safe in the library and found he'd taken all the money."

"Money?" Miss Withers perked up her ears. "Your money, or his?"

"Ours," said Natalie loyally. "Around \$5,000 or more. I kept that much around because sometimes in those days I used to go out buying antique furniture and old glass, and money talks louder than checks with those New Englanders. But don't you see? If Andy had had murder in mind when he left he wouldn't have taken the money. He took it along when he went to meet the girl only because he'd decided to pay her off if that was the only way to keep her from carrying out her threats to make trouble. She was bitter about not getting a chance to be Miss America, and she blamed Andy for her failure."

"Just what did go wrong, do you know?"

"The girl had too purple a past, I think. Anyway, she knew that her backers had paid Andy a lot of money to give her a publicity build-up, and she wanted him to kick back part of it. Andy says she threatened to tell me a lot of awful lies about how he had led her astray with liquor and drugs when she was under the age of consent, and how she now was *encientay* ..."

Miss Withers blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, sorry. Since my trip to Paree I just can't seem to help those Gaulish expressions creeping into my speech. I mean, that she was expecting."

"I see." The schoolteacher swallowed hard. "You know, Mrs. Rowan, all this sounds awfully wicked and out of character for a mere child of eighteen."

"She was old in wickedness, that one! Oh, I know. Anyway, according to the story Andy tells now, he says he got into town around ten. He had a sort of date with the girl, at least she'd set that night—"

"A Thursday, was it?"

"Friday. She'd set it as a deadline. Andy was going to phone her from here and ask her to come up for a showdown, paying over the money as a last resort. But when he let himself into the house he turned on the lights and there was the Harrington girl dead in the middle of my Aubusson carpet!" She pointed, dramatically, to a spot near Miss Withers' foot.

"Quiet, Talley," ordered the schoolteacher. "This is more important than taking a walk." She nodded thoughtfully. "Your husband may be telling the truth. Stranger things have happened—"

Words were fairly tumbling out of Natalie now, a torrent unloosed. "He says his first thought was to phone the police, so he rushed back into the hall where the instrument is." She pointed. "As he was dialing, before they answered, he was hit over the head, and when he came to it was hours later."

The Withers eyebrows went up suspiciously. "Pray how could he tell that?"

"The body, of course. It had been warm when he first touched her, and now it was cold. He realized that whatever alibi he had once had was gone. Andy lost his head, stripped the body to prevent identification, and somehow got her out into his car. Whoever hit him from behind had taken the envelope with the money, but he was too frightened and excited to discover that then. He drove around the rest of the night trying to find a place to leave her. That's his story, but—"

"But there's a catch to it, isn't there?"

Natalie nodded. "Yes. I do so want to believe him. But you see, the phone here at the house had been disconnected for over a month."

"The *phone*? That wasn't what I meant at all. He may not have known. Even if he'd spent several evenings here with the girl they might not have had any reason to use the telephone. As for his call to the police, he may not even have waited for the dial tone, many people don't when they're in a hurry. But it was a worse flaw that occurred to me. Granted that his amended story is true, then just how did the *girl—and her murderer*—get inside?"

Natalie Rowan paused to comfort herself with a nip of cognac from the little bar disguised as a rosewood cabinet. "Ask me something hard," she said bitterly. "Andy kept silent because he didn't want me to know, but *now* he admits that early in their love affair he'd had a key made for her!"

Miss Withers said softly, "What a tangled web we weave—" She pondered. "If your husband had taken the witness stand and told about the key it might have saved his neck." She looked down at the dog, and then rose suddenly, still talking, and moved across the room to jerk aside the draperies in the doorway. The pretty secretary-companion was lurking there, mouth open and ears almost flapping with curiosity—and some other less obvious emotion too.

"Well!" demanded the schoolteacher with some asperity. "Do you two girls take turns at eavesdropping?"

The young woman flushed beet-red, but Natalie Rowan said easily, "She's interested, naturally. Miss Withers, this is Iris Dunn—"

"How do you—" Then Miss Withers gaped. "Not *the* Iris Dunn, the roommate who identified Midge Harrington's body?"

Natalie nodded. "You may think it odd of me, but I looked her up. Iris has been trying to help me uncover something in the Harrington girl's past which might lead us to the real murderer. Come in, dear, and sit down. Three heads are better than one, I always say. Iris, shake hands with our new ally. She has X-ray eyes."

Miss Withers failed to mention that her hunch about someone being behind the curtain had been based on Talley's looking toward the doorway and wagging his tail. Wasn't it Sherlock Holmes who always explained his deductions only to have Dr. Watson say, "Oh, yes, of course, anybody could have seen that!"?

The schoolteacher listened patiently while Natalie Rowan, warmed a little by the brandy, went on to disclose the details of a pitiful and seemingly abortive campaign, two lone women engaged in a desperate lost cause. "But after I knew Andy was innocent I had to do something!" the woman said. "You too must believe him innocent, Miss Withers, or you wouldn't be here."

"I certainly feel that a man in Rowan's position is entitled to the benefit of the doubt," admitted the schoolteacher with native caution. "And even Inspector Piper admits there are weak links in the chain of evidence. What do you think of it all, Miss Dunn?"

Iris shrugged her shoulders, and smiled a surprisingly frank, little-girl smile. "I'm only here because Mrs. Rowan is paying me," she admitted. "And show business is tougher than usual this season. Not, of course, that I couldn't have got an ingénue lead with some road company, only—" She stopped and smiled as if an extremely pleasant thought had just flickered through her mind. Then she said abruptly, "About the murder, I know from nothing."

"But she's been very helpful, anyway," Natalie said firmly. "Now isn't it obvious that if Andy isn't guilty then he was framed by somebody out of Midge's past who wanted her dead and was willing to let an innocent man suffer for it?"

"Midge was hell on men, anybody's men," Iris put in suddenly. "You couldn't let her get a whiff of your date's shaving lotion or she'd try to

climb in his pocket.”

“I see,” said Miss Withers. “Very enlightening. But apart from Andy Rowan, of course, just who were the men in Midge Harrington’s life?”

Iris studied her fingernails. “During the five months we roomed together Midge wasn’t exactly the confiding type about her romances. She had lots of dates, but not many men she went out with more than once or twice. I’ve told Mrs. Rowan all I can.”

“For this sort of investigation,” the schoolteacher admitted, “one should really have professional assistance.”

“But I did go to one of the best private agencies in town,” Natalie put in. “They said they would take my money if I insisted, but it was a lost cause.”

“The masculine mind,” sighed Miss Withers. “So you two started out alone.”

“I’m afraid we haven’t got very far. After over a year, the trail is cold. Iris and I are about at the end of our rope.”

“No clues, no leads at all?” pressed the schoolteacher hopefully.

Natalie said, “When Midge Harrington was sixteen she was named correspondent in a divorce case brought by the wife of her dancing teacher, a man named Nils Bruner. A year later she got mixed up with a swing trumpet-player known as Riff Sprott, who took veronal when she walked out on him, but he didn’t die.”

“They stomach-pumped him!” put in Iris helpfully.

“Nils Bruner and Riff Sprott,” mused Miss Withers. “Something to go on.”

“You won’t go very far,” Iris said. “When Midge was through with a man she was through. I don’t think she ever saw Bruner after his wife got the divorce—she never mentioned his name when I was rooming with her. And Riff Sprott got tired of calling her up about six months before she died. Somebody said he even made an honest woman out of the canary who sang with his band. So—”

Miss Withers said, “Now don’t let’s be so quick to eliminate suspects. We must explore a little further. By the way, who was backing Midge in her fling at being Miss Brooklyn?”

“Just some old stuffy club,” Iris offered.

“The Bigger Flatbush Business Boosters,” Natalie elaborated.

“But a club is only a group of men,” the schoolteacher said sharply. “And men are putty in the hands of a beautiful animal like Midge Harrington. Now wasn’t there one who took a special interest in promoting her career?” But Iris only shook her head.

“I happened to see one of the club checks one day when I was in my husband’s office,” said Natalie. “It was countersigned by a man named Zotos, George Zotos.”

“Oh, *him!*” Iris laughed. “Old Georgie-Porgie, Midge always called him. He was harmless as a cocker spaniel. Besides, he was old—over forty at least.”

Miss Withers pointed out that there is no age limit on the sowing of wild oats. “We must include Mr. Zotos in our list. Bruner, Sprott, and Zotos. Too bad we can’t get the spook of Midge Harrington to point an ectoplasmic finger at the right one.”

“I’m afraid Marika can’t guarantee any *such* results ...” Natalie began.

“I was entirely serious, though perhaps Marika will be helpful to us at some stage of the investigation, if only to throw a scare into the suspects. The murderer, of course, thinks he’s got away with it, and that when Rowan pays the penalty it will be a perfect murder. But he still must be jittery. I wonder if this might not be the time to try psychological methods? Suppose someone were to call on each of our suspects on some pretext or other and then suddenly mention the dead girl’s name? The killer might give himself away by his reaction.”

Natalie choked over another brandy. “What? Oh, I could never get by with anything like that, I’m no actress.”

“*I’m* an actress,” Iris admitted. “At least I’m a member of Equity. But don’t forget I saw Midge in the morgue. Not for all the tea in China would I risk my lily-white neck by snuggling up to her killer.” She shuddered elegantly.

Miss Withers arose, then stood bracing herself against the pull of Talleyrand, who was as usual eager to be off. “That rather leaves it up to me, does it not?”

Mrs. Rowan breathlessly announced that she would gladly pay a reward of ten, no *twenty* thousand dollars to anyone who would get to the truth of the matter!

“I’ll do my best,” promised the schoolteacher. “Not for the money—I still have my amateur standing. But I have an inbred weakness for longshots



and lost causes. And justice, even in these worsening times, is justice.” She marched out of the room, dog and all, to what seemed the distant roll of drums and fanfare of trumpets. The outer door slammed.

The two women sat a little dazed in their chairs. “Golly!” exploded Iris. “I saw it but I don’t believe it! That incredible dog with a hair-ribbon in its bangs—and her hat, like a kid’s kite caught on a telephone pole!”

“It’s what’s under the hat that counts,” said Natalie Rowan thoughtfully. “She may seem to you a preposterous character, but I’ve heard that she can wind that Inspector at Centre Street around her little finger. And somehow having her just walk in here out of thin air and offer to help, just when things seemed so terribly hopeless ... Do you believe in angels?”

“Sure, the Broadway kind. They pinch you when you’re waiting for your entrance cues ... Mrs. Rowan, should you? That’ll be your fourth brandy this morning!”

“I’m not having a drink, dear, I’m pouring the rest of it down the sink. Because somehow I think I’m going to need my wits about me from now on.”

Out in the foyer Miss Hildegard Withers, who had slammed the door from the *inside* with the idea of doing a little eavesdropping of her own, nodded approvingly and then slipped out into the sunlight, letting the door close silently behind her.

“We boil at different degrees.”  
—*Emerson*

### 3.

“GIVE A DOG A BAD NAME,” observed Miss Withers over the breakfast coffee, “and he may live up to it. Or a man either.” She had been musing over the amazing number of famous murderers who had names befitting their deeds—Cordelia Botkin, for instance. And Martin Thorn and Augusta Nack, to say nothing of Herman Mudgett, Ivan Poderjay, and Dr. Crippen ...

Her companion, seated on the opposite chair, looked wistfully at the last piece of buttered toast, and then gave a faint wordless cry of anguish as she spread it with marmalade and bit into a corner.

“Since this present puzzle has to be attacked with a shot in the dark anyway, perhaps it wouldn’t be a bad idea to play hunches? The only available suspects are Bruner, Sprott, and Zotos. Somehow I have a fancy for the name of Riff Sprott, as a potential murderer, I mean.”

Talleyrand, the big apricot poodle, sulked in silence. He had never accepted the dictum that grown dogs eat only one meal, and that at night. His hot brown eyes begrudged his mistress every bite she took, and with the inborn histrionic talents of one descended from a long line of theatrical and circus performers, he pantomimed famishment.

To no avail. His mistress—who had inherited him along with a lot of other trouble from one of her previous attempts at minding the Inspector’s business—was intently studying a weekly magazine of theatrical news, couched in what seemed to her almost a foreign language. Now and then she stopped to commit some phrase to memory. Noting her preoccupation, Talley reached out with elaborate caution and almost but not quite closed his whiskery jaws on the topmost lump in the sugar bowl.

“Bad for the teeth!” Miss Withers snapped, without looking up. “Get down at once.” Talley gave her a reproachful stare, then let his furry body slide off the chair. Then he had a mercurial change of mood and danced off hopefully toward the hall closet.

“You’ve already had your walk,” she told him firmly. “I’m afraid this is one excursion on which you’d only be in the way. I want to appear as

Nemesis, not Mother Goose.” She put on her second-best hat, the one the Inspector always said resembled a runner-up float in the Rose Bowl parade, and then changed it for a more rakish bandanna. She would have liked to try the effect of a beanie, sweater and skirt, and bobby socks, but perhaps that would have been overdoing it. Starting out, she turned back and carefully draped a length of light chain around the door of the refrigerator. “Just in case,” she told the dog, “you are tempted to fall from grace again.”

When she was gone the big poodle made a detailed prospecting trip underneath all the table tops, but it had been some time since the retired schoolteacher had had a visit from any of her former pupils, and nobody had parked any gum. The day, for Talley at least, had got off on the wrong foot.

His mistress, however, felt a surge of hopeful confidence as she came out into the bright fall sunshine, heading briskly over toward the Park and then southward toward the theatrical district and Times Square. She had less than a week in which to perform a minor miracle—but as she reminded herself, the whole world was created in that same space of time.

But musicians, she soon discovered, are strictly nocturnal creatures, like bats and owls and garden snails. Riff Sprott was supposed to inhabit Suite 14B at the Dube Hotel, but wasn’t home. It was not until late that afternoon that Miss Withers gingerly descended a long stair and poked her inquisitive nose into a clammy little basement just off Seventh Avenue, whose blind neon signs proclaimed it to be The Grotto Club. It still smelled of yestereve’s stale liquor and tobacco, of expensive perfume and of food, and even—she fancied—of roaches. In the deserted bar a melancholy youth left off wiping out glasses to wave a grayish towel in the direction she was to follow. Not that she needed help, for the rich and dissonant polyphony blasting forth suddenly from the inner room was guidance enough. It sounded to the schoolteacher about as harmonious as the scraping of a fingernail on a blackboard, but she marched on.

As she gingerly made her way toward the musicians’ stand past tiny tables covered with up-ended chairs and across a dance floor about the size of her living room rug at home, she noted that there was a bored, softly plump red-head leaning against the piano and beating time to the music with heavily enamelled claws. The five men were informally clad, but the girl wore a green evening gown in spite of the fact that it was barely

twilight outside—a gown with nothing much before and rather less than half of that behind, as the song went.

The man with the trumpet—Miss Withers would have called it a “cornet”—was in his early thirties, a wiry nervous chap who wasn’t bad looking if your taste ran to a complexion like a flounder’s belly, a Hollywood shirt of many colors, and a dab of lip whisker. But he put down his horn with weary politeness when he saw that he had a visitor. “Take ten, boys,” he told the others, and stepped down from the stand with a gold-toothy smile. “What’s on your mind, sister?”

Miss Withers took a deep breath and sang out cheerily, “Hiyah, Riff! Autograph me one, will ya? I may look like a square, but I’m not long underwear. I’m a gal that’s strictly in step with hep, yep. You know, you’ve got one of the hottest five-man combos along the alley, and I just dropped in to see if you’ve grooved any new platters lately so I can add ’em to my album of real jumping jive!”

They were all staring at her, and the man with the tenor sax who had been improvising softly suddenly blew a shrill squeak. Riff Sprott backed warily away. “Beg pardon, sister? Come again, and cut out double-talk.”

“Oh, dear!” The maiden schoolteacher shook her head sorrowfully. “You mean I haven’t got the *patois* right, even after studying *Down Beat* and *Weekly Variety* for hours?”

“The act sounds queerer than a three-dollar bill,” Sprott told her. Then he sighed and held out his hand. “Okay, give me the summons and let me get back to rehearsal.”

“Heavens, *I’m* not a process server,” admitted Miss Withers. “I only dropped by, Mr. Sprott, to see if you’ve heard the news about Midge Harrington?”

The man gasped as if he had been kicked in the stomach by a sharp-toed shoe, and his face paled to a leprous green. Then he grasped Miss Withers by the arm and started walking her hastily back across the dance floor, out of earshot of the others. “You said *Harrington*?” He swallowed. “But Midge is *dead*!”

“I know. But the investigation into her murder is being reopened.”

His hand tightened on her arm, but he only said, “Oh?”

“Friend of yours, wasn’t she?”

“Look,” said Biff Sprott. “It’s no particular secret that Midge and I were an item in Winchell at one time, and when she gave me the air I was

slap-happy enough to take a whole bottle of goof-pills. A bellboy found me and the Rescue Squad gave me the works and I didn't start pushing up daisies after all. But that's water over the dam, lady. I'd like very much to forget it."

"Sometimes the dead won't stay forgotten. You admit you knew Midge well at one time. I'm not asking out of idle curiosity, but—what was she really like?"

His eyes were suddenly far away, and there was an odd twist to his mouth. Yes, indeed, I could see him as a murderer, Miss Withers thought. The nympholept type, in love with an ideal of womanhood that never existed and never could exist. A jumble of nerves, too—though there was surprising strength in his pale, slender hands. She would have a black-and-blue mark on her arm tomorrow.

"You want to know what was she like?" he said softly. "Midge was—she was like a phrase of music, just a few bars by itself, that can't be set to words. A hunk of melody that gets under your skin and you can't help humming it all day long till you don't know if you hate it or love it. And you can't decide whether you heard it somewhere or just made it up, only it's unfinished. Maybe if you're in the business you even try to build it into a song, but you never can."

" 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter ...' " quoted Miss Withers.

" 'Therefore ye soft pipes ...' " Sprott blinked. "Poetry, yet! They beat enough of that into me in school. Anyway, Midge Harrington was a lot of girl, and all of it beautiful. You can carve that on her tombstone."

"But a pretty girl is just like a melody, is that what you mean?"

Sprott was fast regaining his self-control. "That's a moldy old Berlin number."

"Sorry. But you and Midge Harrington were very much in love, weren't you? What happened?"

"Sure, I had it bad. I don't know what business it is of yours, but I don't mind telling you that the only thing wrong was that she wasn't enough in love with me. Maybe if I'd met her earlier, before some other guy put her heart in a deep-freeze, it might have been different."

Miss Withers nodded sympathetically. "It has been said that only once does a woman love a man, after that she is in love with love. But who was this other man, this ghost who came between you? It wasn't Nils Bruner?"

“Bruner? You mean the dance guy?” Sprott made a wry face. Then he reached into the pocket of his rainbow-hued shirt and took out a single cigarette, which he set afire. Drawing in the smoke as if he needed it, he eyed her with a cold and suspicious, eye. “How would I know? Who are you anyway, and why are you putting your five cents in?”

Miss Withers told him her name. “I’m just a friend of Inspector Piper’s. Sometimes he discusses his cases with me. That’s how I learned that they are beginning to think at Headquarters that they have the wrong man locked up for Midge’s murder.”

Sprott lighted his cigarette all over again, though it seemed to be burning well. “What? Who says so? That guy Rowan is guilty.”

“No, innocent. I have it on excellent authority. It’s out of this world.”

“Huh?”

“In more ways than one. As a matter of fact, all of this started because of a spirit message received through a medium or clairvoyant or whatever you want to call her—somebody named Marika, up on Ninety-sixth Street.”

“Are you kidding?” Sprott demanded.

“Not in the least. It’s too bad the woman didn’t stay in the trance long enough to get the name of the real murderer, but at least she has touched off a chain reaction that even has upset the official minds at Centre Street.”

He said, a little cautiously, “But what has all this got to do with me?”

“Nothing, of course!” said the schoolteacher warmly. “As I told my friend the Inspector, you’re a well-known artist. I’ve listened to all your broadcasts, and I have some of your records. *Slew-Foot Boogie* and *Her Tears Flowed Like Wine* are my special favorites. It’s ridiculous to suspect you. And I think it’s perfectly silly assigning detectives to shadow every step you take and—but I shouldn’t have let that out, should I?”

Sprott studied his cigarette as if it were some new invention, unique and puzzling. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again.

“Of course,” Miss Withers wickedly continued, “you did react and turn somewhat pale when I mentioned the girl’s name ...”

“And why *wouldn’t* I?” cried Riff. “You went and mentioned it right in front of my wife, who happens to be standing over there by the piano waiting to run through her number.” He looked back over his shoulder. “We been married sixteen months, but she has the idea that I’m still carrying the torch for Midge Harrington. Just a mention of that name and Chloris hits the ceiling. She’ll—”

“Come, come, young man,” interrupted Miss Withers. “Don’t try to tell me that your wife is still jealous of a girl who’s been dead since more than a year ago?”

He nodded wearily. “Lady, she’d even be jealous of you! So please climb back on your broomstick and fly away home, will you?” Politely but firmly he edged her through the bar to the door, and she heard the lock click behind her as a signal that the interview was ended.

Miss Withers climbed back up to the street and then paused to smooth her ruffled feathers. She stood amid signs advertising “Riff Sprott and His Funetic Five, with Chloris Klee” and a color photograph, considerably larger than life, of a curvesome female bearing some resemblance to the girl by the piano. Chloris had her mouth open and seemed about to bite the microphone off its stand.

The schoolteacher turned her back on this overpowering exhibit and took a small notebook from her capacious handbag. She wrote: “*Riff Sprott, The Grotto Club. Big reaction, dubious explanation involving wife Chloris’ supposed jealousy. Admits he carried torch for Midge and that he loved her more than she did him. Find out when Chloris started singing with band.*”

Things, decided Miss Withers, were definitely looking up. She hoped fervently that it really *was* Riff Sprott, not only because he had a name befitting a strangler, but because of that crack about the broomstick. If he did have a guilty conscience, her hint that the police were shadowing him ought to give him something to worry about.

But this was no time for snap judgments, nor to let her intuition have its head. There were other candidates ...

Nils Bruner was next on her list. Dancing-masters keep more regular hours than musicians, but are considerably more difficult to locate, due to an occupational tendency to pull up stakes and move to new and more fertile fields when the going gets tough. The studios in Flatbush were closed and had been for rent since last October. No forwarding address.

But Miss Withers had access to certain information not available to the ordinary amateur detective and sometimes not even to the police. During her twenty-odd years at P.S. 38, generations of grubby urchins had passed through her tutelage to graduate and eventually take their place in the world outside, and with as many as possible of them she kept in touch via Christmas cards. At moments like this she could call on a far-flung

organization, just as Sherlock Holmes did on his Irregulars. Some of her boys and girls had risen to positions of importance and influence.

It was little Willie Prijowski, one in difficulties with third-grade arithmetic but now a bald, bespectacled auditor with one of the public utility companies, who called her back that same evening with the desired information.

So it was that next forenoon—Rowan now had but five days left—Miss Withers marched up two flights of stairs above a neighborhood drugstore in the rabbit warrens of the Grand Concourse region, and rapped sharply on a door bearing the legend: “New Elite School of Professional Tap, Spanish and Rhythm.”

No answer. She rapped again and then entered a tiny reception room, sparsely furnished and of no interest whatever. But from interior regions she could hear soft strains of music. She opened the inner door and peered in.

She saw part of a long, bare hall, with a practice bar under the windows and a full-length mirror opposite. A ponderous, elderly automatic phonograph was grinding out *The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi*, and in the center of the polished floor a tall, fair man was dancing. He danced all by himself, except for the two enormous fans of tinted ostrich feather, and he wore only an undershirt and a pair of Paris-green slacks.

“Whoops!” she gasped, and then “Excuse *me!*” But the solitary dancer was so engrossed that he did not turn his head. She suddenly realized that this was no pixie drag act. Apart from the soft, sinuous femininity of the gestures there was nothing effeminate about him at all. “*Pssst!*” she whispered.

The man turned, stared at her with china-blue eyes, and then said without breaking the rhythm, “All right, come on in if you want to join the class. There’s extra fans in the corner over there.”

Somebody giggled, and Miss Withers stepped inside far enough to see that there were three scantily clad young women, completely equipped with ostrich feathers, facing the teacher and trying to copy his technique.

The music suddenly ended, and he said, “Get it, girls? The whole thing is control. And lag on the beat. As you turn, make ’em think you won’t get the fans in place at the right time, only pick it up one, two—*three!* See?” He looked at his watch. “Okay, it’s eleven-thirty. Only work on this at home during the week, all of you. And Irma, quit dieting or nobody will care whether *you* shake a fan or not.”



The girls scampered noisily toward a dressing room, and Nils Bruner came over to Miss Withers, dropping the fans and mopping his forehead. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I want to take a dancing lesson," she said. "But not fan-dancing." As she spoke she could see herself in the full mirror on the opposite wall, and realized how silly her prepared opening must sound.

But Bruner did not smile. "Of course," he said. "A private ballroom lesson. The waltz?"

He was so fair that he seemed almost an albino. No trace of the pomade, the long sideburns, that she had expected. Indeed, if this tall, strange young man ever had five o'clock shadow it must look like frost or perhaps mold on his decided chin.

"Yes, I think the waltz," Miss Withers admitted.

He looked sad. "Shall I make an appointment for one day next week?"

"You couldn't possibly make it today?" Next week would be too late, at least for Andy Rowan.

Bruner looked sadder still. "I am sorry. But honestly, I'm booked solid. In a few minutes I have a class in tap and soft-shoe—a roomful of screaming teen-agers."

"Skip it," the schoolteacher said abruptly. "Mr. Bruner, I'll break down and confess that I really didn't come here for a lesson, but on business. Do you remember a girl who studied with you a couple of years ago, named Midge Harrington?"

The pale lashes flicked only once, then he said quickly, "Of course! Such a *tragic* end! The girl had great talent if she'd only stuck to her dancing. Such personality, such beauty ..."

"Do you happen to have a professional photograph of her around anywhere?"

This time the hesitation was noticeably longer. "I might have," Bruner said. "Only it's autographed, and it has certain sentimental associations. I suppose you want it for publication in some newspaper? Could you go as high as fifty dollars?"

Miss Withers said, "No, not a newspaper." She thought she could go as high as twenty-five. After some haggling they settled, and she received a large studio portrait of a tall young woman in heavy make-up and ornate Spanish costume, clicking castanets and grinning like La Argentinita. "*To mio maestro Nils Bruner who taught me all I know, Midge,*" was scrawled at

the bottom in a round, childish hand. Somehow that unformed, girlish writing touched the schoolteacher's sympathies as not even the grim morgue photograph had been able to do.

Bruner cocked his head wisely. "You'll want a story to go with the picture, I suppose?"

"Why, yes," Miss Withers admitted. "Anything that will shed light on her character might help."

He lowered his voice. "Of course you've looked it up, and you know that she was named in my wife's divorce suit. For no real reason at all, I assure you, except that Virla wanted to hurt me professionally as much as possible. As a matter of fact, no dancing teacher should ever have a wife. Because in my profession once in a blue moon you run into real talent, a personality destined for stardom and bright lights. It is almost impossible to develop that talent, to help the rosebud open into full bloom, without appearing at least to have a personal interest. People misunderstand."

"You weren't in love with her, then?"

"*Not* for publication," said Nils Bruner quickly. "But you experts understand how to write such things without—without making trouble, shall I say? Anyway, it's the truth that I never saw Midge after the divorce, though I always knew that if she struck it rich she'd pay me for the private lessons I had to give her on credit. She never had any money, you know. No family or anything."

"An orphan—or did she get born in a seashell, like the other Venus?"

"I think she had a mother," he said slowly. "Supposed to have been a Floradora girl once, but you can't prove it by me. Anyway, she boarded out the kid with some people in Brooklyn Heights, and after a while she quit sending money and Midge was on her own."

Miss Withers agreed that this was all very sad, but the interview seemed to be getting off the track. "It's too bad you didn't marry the child," she said. "Midge was very much in love with you, wasn't she?"

The pale blue eyes clouded. "No," he said, "she wasn't. Something always got in the way. I always thought it must have been some man she couldn't forget, somebody she met before she was my pupil."

Reenter the ghost-lover motif. "I see," said Miss Withers. "A grand passion before she was sixteen? Dear, dear."

There was a slight interruption while the three pupils, now in street clothes and carrying little satchels, said their goodbyes and wended their

way homeward. But the schoolteacher still lingered, vaguely dissatisfied.

“Anything else I can do to help?” said Nils Bruner. “A photograph of me, for instance? I don’t know what kind of feature your magazine plans, but if you can get in the name of the studio somewhere—”

“I’m not with a magazine either,” Miss Withers told him. “I wouldn’t put it past *Life* or *Look* or *Peep* to dig up the Midge Harrington case at this time, but I’m not a ghoul, I’m only a private investigator without portfolio. I supposed you’d heard that the police have the wrong man in prison and that they’re reopening the investigation into her murder?”

Bruner very softly said something in a foreign language, but she could translate his expression. She suddenly realized that she was alone with a powerful and very angry man, a man who had talked too much in the hope of chiseling a little extra publicity and now deeply regretted it. He seemed to be coming a little apart at the seams ...

“Probably there’s nothing in it after all,” she said quickly. “The whole thing originated in a spirit message, you know. Some medium named Marika down on Ninety-sixth Street came up with word that Rowan is innocent, but *so far* she hasn’t named the real killer.”

“The police—they take the word of such a person?” he asked thickly.

“Only because there seems to be corroborative evidence. Thank you for your help, Mr. Bruner. And of course for the picture.” She beat a speedy retreat. Safe and sound in the street again, she took out her notebook and wrote: “*Nils Bruner, Crotona Building. No reaction, much too casual. Denies affair with Midge but admits she owed him money. Svengali angle? Where was Virla Bruner that night?*”

Somewhat weary with her labors, she popped into the drugstore for a cup of tea and a sandwich. She had to admit that Bruner seemed every whit as promising a suspect as had the trumpet-player.

The odds were even better, she realized half an hour later. Because from her perch at the soda fountain she could see the entrance to the stairway leading up to the dance studio, and no horde of teen-agers came swarming in for their class in tap and soft-shoe. It was twelve o’clock—and then twelve-thirty. Nobody went into the place at all except one precocious little miss in a tight sweater, with a basket of black curls and the map of Ireland on her face. She paused in the doorway to smear on fresh mouth then ran up the stairs three steps at a time.

“So!” said Miss Withers. She lurked around for another half-hour or so, but nobody came down the stairs.

“I might as well try to decide it the way my pupils would, with eeny, meeny, miny, mo,” she said to herself as she headed toward the bus. “But just to play fair I suppose I have to include George Zotos, the sole remaining nomination.”

There was one good thing about a manufacturer, from her point of view. He had to stay with his factory. But, of course, Mr. Zotos was bound to be a let-down, after the others.

It was a block-long building, grimy with soot, located in the wrong part of Long Island City. The reek of overpowering sweetness, of vanilla and chocolate and cinnamon, was almost unbearable half a block away, and by the time Miss Withers had talked her way inside the place she made up her mind never to eat another pastry as long as she lived.

The cream-puff king sat in a big chair behind a big desk in an office whose walls were covered with convention pictures and framed membership certificates. The man himself was soft and round, with dark curly hair thinning on top and moist brown eyes. Iris had been right, he was rather like a cocker spaniel. But it was a wary spaniel, not sure whether to growl or wag its tail.

Her previous efforts to pass as a hep-cat and as a student of Terpsichore having met with no marked success, this time Miss Withers laid her cards on the table. “Mr. Zotos,” she informed the very bewildered little man, “I’ve come to see what you have to say, if anything, about the news that the police have a new lead on the murder of Miss Midge Harrington.”

“Who?” he muttered.

“Midge Harrington, the girl you tried to help get to be Miss Brooklyn last year. She was murdered, remember?”

Then she saw that tears were welling out of his brown eyes, big tears that ran unashamed down his plump cheeks.

“Yes,” he whispered. “I remember. But why do you come to me?”

“Because I’m a relative of hers,” said Miss Withers without shame. (After all, were we not all cousins after Adam, or the apes?) “I’m calling on everyone who knew her, to help the police. After all they haven’t much to go on—the whole thing was reopened by an odd clause in somebody’s will, and by a supposed spirit message—”

“A—a spirit message? I don’t understand.”

“Nor do I. But this Marika person, over on Ninety-sixth Street, got a message saying that the man the police arrested and convicted is innocent. And there seems to be some corroborative evidence. I’d like to see justice done, and Midge avenged.”

“Yes,” he said softly, still not using a handkerchief. “Midge Harrington was the only girl—” He gulped. “She’s gone, and that’s all that matters. But she was the only woman I ever could have loved, you see. I understood that they got the man who did it, but if they’re reopening the case the police probably know what they’re doing. If I can help in any way—” He brightened, and reaching into his desk. “Would you like to see something?”

And so for half an hour Miss Withers had to admire his scrapbooks, containing every line of the publicity Rowan had planted for Midge, every bathing-suit picture, every simpering posed portrait. The prize shot, on a page of its own, was one of Georgie-Porgie Zotos himself presenting Midge with a corsage of orchids at some luncheon affair, and staring up at her as a little boy might peer into a toyshop window. “I even have a privately-made recording of her voice, singing ‘*It’s Cold Outside*,’ ” he went on.

“Sometimes I play it on my little portable. What a woman!” George Zotos sighed, shaking his head.

“You loved her, didn’t you—very much?”

“What man wouldn’t?” he asked, surprised at the question.

“She loved you too?”

Zotos blinked. “Of *course* not! Miss Harrington was—well, I always felt that she was unapproachable, untouchable. Sort of as if she always really belonged to someone else, somebody she met or dreamed about years before.”

“Here we go again,” said Miss Withers under her breath.

“She wasn’t like anybody else,” said the man with painful seriousness. “She was a work of art, she was the frosting on the cake. If what you say is true, and the man who did that awful thing is still at large, I only wish I could get him alone for five minutes ...”

“To smother him to death with cream-puffs?” Miss Withers said, but not aloud. She stood up. “Thank you, Mr. Zotos. Here’s my card, and if you think of anything that might shed light on the case, do call me.”

“Of course. If there’s anything I can do—”

“There is one thing. Can you tell me just why Midge Harrington’s dreams of being Miss Brooklyn, and trying out for the Miss America

crown, couldn't come true?"

"Why—" He hesitated.

"Was it her purple past, whatever that means?"

"I wouldn't say that, I wouldn't say that at all. It's just that the committee behind the Atlantic City beauty pageant has certain rigid rules and specifications, which are naturally subscribed to by the local and state committees. We were advised that our candidate, Miss Harrington, was ineligible. Some busybody had written a letter—"

"Perhaps it was because Midge was living at the Rehearsal Arts Club over in Manhattan instead of here in Brooklyn?"

"Perhaps," agreed Zotos doubtfully.

Miss Withers headed for the door. "One last word, Mr. Zotos. When the police come around questioning you, you needn't mention that I dropped by. Sometimes they get annoyed when I try to interfere."

"Surely," he said, from very far away. As she went out of the office she heard him hastily putting away the scrapbooks. On the subway back to town, still feeling wrung out like a towel, Miss Withers wrote: "*George Zotos, a sticky Caliban. Does each man kill the thing he loves? Anyway he still loves her. A longshot bet.*"

As the schoolteacher neared home she felt an increasing uneasiness of spirit. When he heard how she had spent the last two days the Inspector was sure to accuse her of hurling monkeywrenches into the machinery again. And it was more than probable that Talleyrand, the other male in her life, had amused himself by making an apple-pie bed in her room or otherwise disgracing himself during her long absence. As she came up the street she had vague but unpleasant premonitions of disaster. She resented them all the more because this was the time when her fabled intuition was supposed to be at work, her mental shortcuts which had sometimes led her to the correct answer without going through all the intermediate stages. Of course, she was well aware that anything perceived intuitively must afterward be checked with reason ...

She hurried up the stairs and put her key in the lock. At least Talley wasn't howling with loneliness, the soft little howls that drive other tenants slowly crazy. In fact, the big poodle was in his favorite spot on top of the closed cover of the kitchen stove, sleeping peacefully.

The telephone was off the hook, a sure indication that it had rung and rung until in desperation the dog had pawed it into silence. Before taking

off her coat and hat she sat down and called the Inspector, but he was not at home and he was not at Centre Street.

“Is he out on a murder case?” she demanded of the sergeant.

“Ma’am, I don’t know.”

“And if you *did* know you wouldn’t tell me!” She hung up, rather abruptly. Then she put murder out of her mind and prepared a somewhat sketchy meal for herself and the poodle, settling down afterward with a copy of *War and Peace*, a classic she was always beginning and never able to finish. Tonight was no exception. A little after ten-thirty, with the phone still stubbornly refusing to ring, she got out the phone book, which at times constituted her favorite reading material.

There it was, like an answer to prayers. “Marika—West 96th ...” Inspired, she dialled the number. Almost instantly there was an answer, a man’s voice heavy with caution. “Yes?”

“I’d like to speak with Marika, please.”

“Who’s calling?”

“I don’t know that it matters, but my name is Hildegarde Withers. I want to make an appointment ...”

There were muffled male voices and then somebody else took over. “Hildegarde!” roared the Inspector, “what in Judas Priest’s name do you mean calling at a time like this, and how’d you find out about it?”

“I really did want an appointment,” said Miss Withers. “With Marika, not with you.”

“Get out your ouija board then,” he told her. “Because the dame they call Marika is right here on the floor beside me, colder than Kelsey!”

“Oh, my prophetic soul! She was strangled with that same necklace, wasn’t she, Oscar?”

“That she was not. Somebody bashed out her brains with her own crystal ball.”

“Small habits well pursued betimes May reach the dignity of crimes.”  
—*Hannah More*

## 4.

“HOLD EVERYTHING!” SAID MISS Withers. “I’ll be there in ten minutes. No, make it fifteen, I forgot I’m not dressed.”

“Don’t bother, Hildegarde,” came the Inspector’s chill tones. “We’re not having open house up here. This is one time you’ll have to keep the hell out.”

She hesitated only a moment. “I’m afraid I’m *in* already.”

“*What?*” Piper made it sound like a swear-word.

“As an accessory after the fact. Of course,” the schoolteacher continued breathlessly, “I had only the best of intentions in doing what I did, and Marika was obviously mixed up somehow in the Harrington case. But never mind, after all. You’re right, I shouldn’t always be interfering. You’ve probably got the thing all solved by now anyway. Sorry I mentioned it.”

“*Wait a minute!*” cried the Inspector, giving an unconscious imitation of Jack Benny on the radio. “You’re already in this up to your bustle. Now you get up here fast, dressed or not, or I’ll send a squad car after you and have you dragged here in handcuffs!”

She told him to send away, it would save taxi fare. And a few minutes later the maiden schoolteacher, clutching her hat, was whisked uptown to the accompaniment of screeching sirens, past the melancholy and bird-bedaubed grandeur of Grant’s Tomb to one of the dingier residential blocks on West Ninety-sixth. Even as a stolid and disappointingly uncommunicative police led her up the two flights of narrow, ill-lighted stairs she had a clear vision of what the apartment—*chez* Marika—would be like. It would be cluttered with all the hackneyed stage properties of the professional soothsayer, heavy with incense, frayed velvet drapes and perhaps even a stuffed owl gathering dust on the mantel.

There would probably be a discreet little card on the door, with the name “Marika” in pseudo-Egyptian script, and perhaps a human eye peering astigmatically through something intended to represent The Veil



Through Which We Cannot See but looking more like a bad Los Angeles smog.

But, as she admitted to herself, Miss Withers was so wrong. She was ushered through a plain door into a brilliantly lighted, cheery room of the cozy type, with comfortable overstuffed chairs, bright prints on the wall, a portable phonograph and big, well-filled bookcases. To her inquiring nostrils came the immediate scent of the bowl of stocks and snapdragons on the mantel, of hot flashbulbs, tobacco and sweat—the latter easily traceable to Inspector Oscar Piper and his cohorts, who swarmed around the other end of the room under the bay windows. Crane her neck as she would, the schoolteacher could get no glimpse of the object of their professional attention, but she fancied that she caught another odor—something sweetish and a little sickening.

She was perfectly content to leave them alone with the remains. As she watched the specialists of the homicide squad carry out their appointed task Miss Withers thought, as always at such moments, of how sometimes one can't see the forest for the trees. She respected them, but the respect was mixed with scorn. Within their limitations they knew their job inside out, but the trouble was that they often performed it that way. Crime, according to her concepts, was far more than an absolute, scientific fact, or something to be attacked and conquered with cameras and fingerprint powders and microscopes.

The schoolteacher would have been happy to outline her theories to the roomful of detectives, but since they were paying her no attention whatever she quietly moved across the room to an open doorway. Only momentarily did she resist the impulse to snoop a bit in the little refrigerator, the cupboards, and the garbage can. Marika was clean, though not meticulously so. She had dined at home, on baked potatoes, two lamb chops with fresh frozen peas, and a custard. It seemed oddly plain plebeian fare for a professional mystic.

Yet what else? Breast of griffon under glass, with creamed mandrake and poison ivy salad? She smiled wryly at the thought. After all, she knew very little about mediums. The one or two she had met looked as if they lived on tea and crackers, and that seldom.

Miss Withers came back into the living room, trying to catch the Inspector's eye, but he was still occupied. However, there was another door across the room, and her besetting sin of curiosity led her to tiptoe over and

quietly open it. She looked into a bedroom, small but comfortable, furnished in early American with conservatively feminine touches. There was a framed portrait on the chest of drawers, depicting a glamorous girl with quite incredible eyelashes, wearing a turban.

She started in, but here she met a snag in the shape of a uniformed officer who suddenly stood up and stared at her. He was evidently standing guard over a middle-aged woman in a flowered housecoat who sat on the edge of the bed, shaking with sobs, and showing signs of wanting to cry on his shoulder. She looked rather like a manatee, being bulging and shapeless and faintly moist—like something recently risen from the depths of the sea and anxious to get back.

“Oh, excuse me!” said Miss Withers politely.

“It’s okay, you ain’t exactly interrupting anything,” the officer told her. He seemed to be glad of the intrusion. “Who sent you, the Inspector?”

“Providence,” Miss Withers told him. But she hastily backed out of the room, judging the time inopportune for a survey of the dead woman’s bedroom. Back in the front room again she knelt down beside the nearest bookcase, seeking as was her wont a shortcut to the tastes and personality of the woman who had bought these volumes, who had arranged and dusted and presumably read them.

“Looking for a good racy novel, Hildegard?” the Inspector suddenly greeted her.

Miss Withers stood up. She saw that across the room a sallow young man whom she vaguely remembered to be one of the deputy medical examiners was just closing his little black bag preparatory to leaving. He was saying, “Yes, quarter of ten—give it half an hour either way. Maybe I can cut it closer after the PM, if somebody can tell me when she ate last.”

“Around seven, I think,” spoke up the schoolteacher suddenly.

They all turned and stared at her. “Now how the hell do you know that?” demanded the Inspector. “Unless you were here.”

“There is no need for profanity, Oscar. I deduce the time by certain evidence in the kitchen. The oven is stone-cold, though she baked a potato. The grease in the frying pan isn’t completely congealed—and the dishcloth is still a little damp while the dish towel is dry. That tells its own story to anyone who ever kept house.”

“Women!” said the doctor, not unfriendly. “But around seven it is, and I’ll work on it from that angle.” He nodded cheerfully to them all, and went

out. His leaving cleared the traffic jam in the bay window, and now Miss Withers had a fifty-yard-line view of what lay on the rug, beside a little cherrywood table and two chairs, one of which was overturned.

“Oh!” she gasped.

Miss Hildegarde Withers preferred to look upon murder in a purely objective way, as a problem in human behavior, a chess problem. Bodies were so concrete, so real, so helpless—with every wound crying like a tongue.

The woman who claimed to have seen into the Beyond was now obviously in a position to verify her glimpses. She lay on the rug face upward, supine, arms akimbo. But she was a far cry from the dumpy little sycophant the schoolteacher had pictured as the typical spiritualistic medium. In life Marika must have been pretty, a little on the thin side, with dark, almost black hair and darker eyes. She could not have been much more than thirty, and still resembled the photograph in the bedroom. Only now, of course, she wore no make-up, no eyelashes or lipstick, and her long white legs stuck awkwardly forth from the folds of a comfortable but far from glamorous negligée.

And her lips were almost smiling—not in the awful *risus*, but as if she were asleep and dreaming pleasant dreams. It was only when you drew closer that you saw the depression in the line of her cranium, and the wide blackish shadow on the rug which wasn’t a shadow at all.

“Okay,” said the Inspector briskly. “Now you’ve seen her, and your curiosity is satisfied. Only mine isn’t. I want to know why you called up here tonight, and what else you know about this case.”

“I telephoned to make an appointment for a sitting. And I also intended to drop a warning to Marika, because I realized that some things I had said might put her life in danger.”

The Inspector said softly that he would be damned. He would have said more, but a plainclothes detective came up to him with a question, holding something in his hand which looked like a glass bowling ball. “No,” said Piper. “No need to pack it special. Only prints on it are the dead woman’s.”

“Murderers *will* wear gloves, won’t they, Oscar?” Miss Withers sniffed. “Is that the murder weapon?”

He nodded. “One of her props. Might mean it wasn’t premeditated at all. Or the killer might have brought some other weapon and then switched

to this because it was so handy—and so heavy.”

“ ‘The clouded crystal ball,’ ” quoted the schoolteacher a little giddily. “Clouded by her own blood. Oscar, do you think the poor woman was gazing into it when the murderer snatched it up and brained her?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

She looked at him. “As a general thing my guesses are much better than yours, and you know it. But, Oscar, I understood from Mrs. Rowan that Marika was a trance medium—”

“Mrs. *Rowan*? What’s all this? I thought that when you came back from Sing Sing with your tail between your legs you’d got smart and stopped meddling!”

“My impersonation only failed because the real Mrs. Rowan had had a change of heart and been up there before me.” She told him of how she had run Natalie to earth, and about the spirit message from the late lamented Emil Fogel.

“Double-distilled bilge!” was his verdict.

“Perhaps, Oscar. But as I was about to say, Marika was a trance medium. Isn’t it odd that she used the old-fashioned crystal? I’ve read up a little on this sort of thing, and there are distinct levels. The high-class mediums scorn to use props.”

“You don’t know Marika like I do,” said the Inspector. “She had everything. We found a ouija board and a planchette in the cabinet over there, also a spirit-writing slate, a lot of astrology charts, and several decks of cards with funny pictures.”

“Tarot cards? They’ve been used in telling fortunes since before the foundations of the pyramids were laid. Mostly by charlatans, of course. But where there’s so much smoke mightn’t there be some fire?”

“We don’t have to worry about that angle,” the Inspector told her. “Marika was a clairvoyant, fortuneteller, a medium, and a self-accredited adviser on problems of love, fortune and marriage. And in spite of all that, she wasn’t even able to foresee her own murder.” His voice was filled with heavy scorn.

“All the same, Oscar, there are more things in heaven and earth—” Miss Withers shook her head. “Marika was an out-and-out fake, then?”

“Aren’t they all? I’m not saying that we found any of the wet cheesecloth and ice-packed gloves and magic lanterns around the place, such as old-time phonies used. But a smart operator doesn’t have to, today.”

“Dear, dear,” murmured the schoolteacher. “Oscar, just what would you say were the chances of a fake medium getting a genuine message?”

“Are you kidding?” said Oscar Piper. “About the same as Barney Google’s Spark Plug winning the Kentucky Derby next spring.”

But Miss Withers wasn’t listening. She said, half to herself, “Unless, of course, the medium happened to have sources of information which actually weren’t supernatural at all.” She was watching a policeman across the room who was outlining the body with green chalk-marks on the rug.

“Marika Thoren had a police record,” pronounced the Inspector, as if that settled everything. He took a slip of paper from his pocket. “Arrested January 1948 on suspicion of fortune-telling without a license, case dismissed. Arrested May 1948, same charge, nol-prossed. Arrested July 1949, dismissed.”

“No convictions, I gather?”

He shrugged. “Victims don’t like to sign complaints, or testify in court they’ve been duped. But the boys on the Bunco Squad keep after people like Marika.”

“I can well imagine. Hounding the poor woman from pillow to post, without any proof at all that she’d ever broken the law. You and your thought-police!”

“Never mind that now!” he snapped testily. “Just why do you imagine something you said might have put Marika on the spot?”

“Well, Oscar, that’s a long story—” Miss Withers suddenly broke off, pointing across the room. “Look!”

The broken body of Marika was being gingerly lifted into the long wicker basket, preparatory to its long last ride to Bellevue’s morgue and the attendant grisly ceremonies. Where it had lain, pressed flat by the weight on her hips, was the crushed remains of something. Somehow the schoolteacher managed to be the first to snatch it up. “Could this be a clue, Oscar? It seems to be a man’s hat.”

He took it from her, with controlled asperity. “So it is,” he said, brightening: “Well, if that isn’t the luck of the Irish! A perfect murder—only we get a break. The hat must have been knocked off in the struggle, and she happened to fall smack on it. Imagine the murderer looking everywhere for his hat, and then having to sneak off without it!”

“I suppose his initials are on the sweatband?” Miss Withers asked.

“No. But we don’t need initials. Give the boys in the lab an hour or two with this—”

“And they’ll know the murderer’s head size?”

“They’ll know more about the owner of this hat than God or his mother,” promised Piper. “You wait and see.” He handed it over to one of the detectives, with explicit instructions. Then he came back to the schoolteacher, looking at his wrist watch. “All right, you were going to come clean. Make it fast, I’ve got a witness waiting in the other room to be questioned.”

“The manatee?” said Miss Withers. “She’s a witness to the actual murder?”

“No,” he snapped. “Just the landlady, but she got a good look at the killer when she passed him on the stairs.”

“I wonder which one it was,” breathed the schoolteacher. “My vote is still for Mr. Sprott, only he’d probably wear a beret instead of a hat ...”

“What in Judas Priest are you talking about?”

“The three suspects, of course.” She took a deep breath, and told all.

But the Inspector took it somewhat lightly. “No dice,” he said.

“Perhaps not. But I repeat, Oscar, that I have been running around all over town dropping hints to the three people I consider eminent suspects in the Harrington murder that Marika had already received word from supernatural sources about Rowan’s innocence—and moreover that we expected her to provide the name of the real murderer at any moment.”

“*We?*”

“Perhaps, Oscar, I did take your name in vain just a trifle. To make it all sound more authentic and official, of course.”

He glowered. “Someday you’re going to burn every finger on your little hot hands, cutting corners that way.” The Inspector took time out to light up a fresh cigar. “But this time I don’t think you tossed any monkeywrenches into the machinery. We’ll investigate all possible angles, of course. But for my money the real murderer of Midge Harrington is still sweating out his last week up in the condemned row at Sing Sing. There’s no connection between the two deaths, except in your overfertile imagination.”

“But Oscar—if Rowan isn’t guilty, the real killer must have a very guilty conscience. Suppose he was superstitious enough to believe that

Marika was genuine and actually could go into another trance and name him?”

“It wasn’t that kind of a murder. Marika had hundreds of clients wearing a path up the stairs. Most of them were in some sort of jam or else they wouldn’t have come. It’s not surprising that a woman whose husband is under sentence of death was one of the collection. Marika, like anyone in her racket, simply drew the Rowan woman out until she found out what she wanted most to hear, went into a fake trance, and told her the good news.”

“And then, by some odd coincidence, got murdered as soon as I spread the word around about what she had said about Rowan’s innocence?”

“Life is full of coincidences. And believe me,” the Inspector went on very seriously, “girls like Marika are poor insurance risks. Messing around in the lives and emotional tangles of other people isn’t a safe occupation. Maybe somebody who took her advice found it didn’t work out and came back tonight for a spot of revenge. Or maybe the word got around that she made a lot of money. We found an empty cash-box in the bedroom, left open on the floor. From where I sit it looks like just another case of robbery and felonious assault ending in homicide.”

“Perhaps you’ve been sitting too long, Oscar.”

“Look, it must have been somebody she knew,” he went on logically. “Because Marika would have been suspicious of any new customer especially, that late in the evening. Look at that door—a chain, a bolt, in addition to the regular lock. Besides, she had an appointment book, one of those desk pads. Only today’s page—”

“It’s missing? Then she *did* have an appointment with her murderer. But, Oscar, aren’t there ways you can treat the remaining sheets to bring out what had been written above?”

Piper shook his head. “The killer tore out all of next week too, and took the pages away with him. The careful type.”

“Yes, except, of course, for the hat. But everyone makes mistakes.”

“He made a worse one, and that was being seen coming up the stairs.” So indeed did it appear when Mrs. Rose Fink was brought in to make her statement. The woman was typical of that ubiquitous breed who get a ‘pittance and free rent of a basement apartment for “managing” old brownstones converted into apartments; grayish, bloated females cut out of the same lump of underdone dough with a perpetual squint from years of peering through keyholes.

This was Mrs. Fink's crowded hour, and she was inclined to make the most of it. It had been about twenty minutes to ten that evening when she had gone upstairs to replace a dead bulb in the top-floor hall, and on her way down she had almost run into the murderer's arms. He was just coming up the first flight, so somebody must have pressed a button releasing the lobby door. Mrs. Fink had noticed him because he seemed in a hurry. No, he was no tenant, nobody she had ever seen before.

From the corner where she remained on sufferance, Miss Withers watched with reluctant admiration as the Inspector gently steered the woman away from her natural inclination to describe the stranger as the traditional dark-skinned, powerful brute six feet six inches tall, with simian arms and carrying a suspicious-looking bundle, presumably a hatchet. Pinned down, Mrs. Fink decided that what she had seen was a man of about Piper's own height, which was five feet eight. He had been on the stocky side, wearing a dark hat pulled down over his eyes and a gabardine trenchcoat. Wearing gloves, or else his hands were in his pockets.

"But I'll never forget that face," the woman declared solemnly. "He wore big thick glasses, and the nose on him—" Mrs. Fink held a pudgy palm eight inches or so in front of her face. "There was a nose that was a nose!"

Pressed further, Mrs. Fink didn't think he had a moustache, but inclined to the idea that maybe he hadn't shaved recently. "Go on," Piper prompted. "The man pushed past you and went on up the stairs. You went back to your own apartment?"

"Yes, sir. In the basement. I had some unmentionables to rinse out." She smiled, a coy sort of leer that made the Inspector wince visibly. But she went on, "I was just finishing, maybe half an hour later, when Mr. Bagmann, the new tenant in the flat under this, came down to complain about the noise. He has to get up early because he's a chef, and he's always complaining when any of the other tenants have a party."

Piper nodded to a sergeant, who cleared his throat and said, "Paul G. Bagmann, 41, short-order cook at Childs' Columbus Circle. A real sourpuss, and we let him go back to bed, Inspector, after we got his statement. No other tenants happened to be home except the Girards, an elderly couple who have the entire first floor. They didn't hear anything, but they went to bed early and they're both deaf as posts."

"Just what did Bagmann say he heard?"



“Says he heard loud music and people stamping around and dancing. That woke him and he looked at his watch. It was eight minutes after ten. Then he turned over and tried to go back to sleep and there was a tremendous crash.”

“That’s right!” chimed in Mrs. Fink. “So to shut him up I climbed upstairs and listened at the door, but I couldn’t hear anything. I knocked, and for a minute I thought I heard soft footsteps. Then I knocked again and sang out, ‘It’s only me, dearie!’ though, of course, Marika would have known who it was—she had nothing to do with the other tenants and I was the only person who would be likely to knock without ringing from the lobby.”

“You thought she was in, but wouldn’t come to the door?”

The woman nodded. “I was hoping that since I’d had the climb up three flights for nothing, maybe I’d drop in for a cup of tea and let Marika cast the cards for me like she did sometimes.”

“You fell for that stuff too?” Piper looked disgusted.

“And why not? She never charged me nothing, and she had the Gift, all right. Once she gave me a message about beware of a dark lady, and sure enough three weeks later a Spanish girl who’d just moved into 2B got arrested for peddling marijuana. And once Marika gave me a long shot at Pimlico, at least she told me it was a lucky day for number two and number five ...”

“Okay.” The Inspector looked at his watch. “Go on, Mrs. Fink.”

“Well, when she didn’t answer the second knock, I said to myself—”

“Just tell us what you did.”

“I listened. And then I heard somebody on the other side of the door. They must have slid the bolt, because when I outs with my passkey and unlocks the door, I find it won’t open. Then a cold shiver runs up my back spine. So it’s happened, I says to myself. Somebody’s heard about her money, and got to her. Because it was no secret around the neighborhood that Marika paid everything in cash and had no truck whatever with banks.”

“She didn’t trust banks, not even with federal insurance of savings?”

“If you don’t put your money in a bank you don’t have to pay no income tax,” Mrs. Fink pointed out with deep worldly wisdom. “Once when I came to collect the rent, Marika went into her bedroom and I heard the rattle of a tin box and then she came out with the cash. So while I had my

ear to the door I heard that same noise in the bedroom, like somebody in a desperate hurry fiddling with the lock. So I knew it really was a burglar.

“I screamed bloody murder and went down the stairs two, three steps at a time. Mr. Bagmann was just coming out of his door in a bathrobe to see what was the matter, and we both went down and woke up Roy, that’s my husband. We all went back through the basement and up the rear outside stair fast as ever we could. Marika’s kitchen door was wide-open and swinging in the wind, and all the lights were blazing. When I rushed in here and seen her flat on her back on the floor, weltering in a pool of blood and breathing her last, I said to myself—”

“Skip what you said!”

Mrs. Fink bridled. “Well, I bent over her and I heard her say ‘Mother’ with her last gasp. Then she gave up the ghost.”

The Inspector glared over his shoulder at Miss Withers, who had come out of her corner and was making frantic gestures. Then he turned to the sergeant, indicating Mrs. Fink. “Okay, take her downtown and after the statement’s typed up have her sign it. Then tomorrow let her look through the picture files, especially burglary and crimes of violence against women. Maybe she can pick out that nose for us.”

“Oscar,” whispered Miss Withers softly in his ear, “the woman is lying. Marika couldn’t have been conscious or lived more than a few seconds with her head bashed in.”

From the doorway came Mrs. Fink’s jibing “Wass you dere, Sharlie?”

Then at last Miss Withers and the weary Inspector were alone except for a uniformed cop who would be on guard here until relieved in the morning, and who already had his eye on an easy chair and was wishing they would be off.

“Nothing wrong with the Fink woman’s hearing,” remarked the schoolteacher thoughtfully. “Perhaps she really did hear the money-box being ransacked on the other side of a thick oak door and away off in the bedroom. But as for her recognizing the murderer in a rogue’s gallery photograph, I have my doubts. Try her on a picture of Jimmy Durante, or Cyrano de Bergerac or even Pinocchio.”

“There you go again, trying to make simple things complicated!” Piper exploded as he struggled into his topcoat. “This is an open-and-shut case if there ever was one, and well have the murderer in our hands inside of forty-eight hours. Mrs. Fink gave a good description of him, even if she did

romanticize a little about Marika's last moments. We know the killer was somebody Marika knew, or she'd never let him in. Probably a client—or maybe a boy friend because she wouldn't have been dancing with a client. Anyway, he knew that she had a cache of dough around, and probably tried to borrow some. When she wouldn't come across he grabbed up the crystal ball off the table and let her have it over the noggin. But she fell with such a loud crash she woke the tenant downstairs—”

“She fell right on top of the murderer's head, which got knocked off in the struggle? Then he must have been wearing it at the time, even while they were dancing. Isn't that a little unusual?”

“All right, so he was a roughneck. Murderers often are. When he heard the landlady at the door he shot the bolt and went right on, jimmied the cash-box or else found Marika's keys, took one last look for the missing hat and then gave it up and raced down the back stairs.”

Miss Withers cocked her head. “And then he went out through the basement and past the landlady's apartment? Funny he didn't run into them.”

“No, the rear basement door is locked on the inside. And there isn't any side deliveryway, these buildings are built flush. The only way he could go was over the back fences and out through one of the big apartment houses down the street. The fences are six feet high, which proves he was the athletic type. I was down in the court, and I'd hate to have to get over those in a hurry in the dark.”

Miss Withers nodded, with a pleasant smile. “It all sounds very plausible, Oscar. All you have to look for is a man about five feet eight, stocky, wearing thick glasses and with an extremely prominent nose. He's an old friend of Marika's, now desperately in need of money, who wears a hat probably bought out west somewhere, it has a touch of the ten-gallon style about it. He's an athlete, perhaps even a strong-man or acrobat—”

“Why that? It wouldn't take so much strength to swing that heavy crystal. Oh—you mean the fence.”

“Just a guess, Oscar. In the lower shelf of that bookcase are a lot of back copies of *Billboard*, the monthly magazine of the carnival and outdoor amusement world. That would imply that at one time Marika was in the business, perhaps working her act in a travelling show. Presumably she had friends in the profession, with whom she kept in touch.

“Attagirl!” cried the Inspector. “Now for once you’re being some help. I probably would have got around to looking at the stuff in those bookcases later, though.”

Miss Withers looked at him sadly, and shook her head. “It’s a nice hypothesis, Oscar. I’d like to accept your idea, principally because it relieves my conscience of any guilt for Marika’s death. But I can’t buy it.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because for one thing the description of the murderer couldn’t fit Riff Sprott, or Nils Bruner, or George Zotos, my three principal suspects in the Harrington murder.”

“I’ve got one headache already,” snapped Oscar Piper. “Two is too many.” He headed for the door, but the schoolteacher trotted after him.

“Seriously, Oscar—”

“Relax,” he told her. “We know all about those three boy friends of Midge Harrington’s. They all had alibis for the night she was killed.”

“They would—the murderer particularly.” They were going down the stairs. “Oscar?” cried the schoolteacher plaintively.

“Well, what? Oh, I suppose you want a ride home?”

“Nothing of the sort,” she snapped. “I just want you to have somebody ask Mrs. Fink, and her husband, and Mr. Bagmann, which one of them unbolted the front door of Marika’s apartment after they came in the back way and discovered the body.”

“Okay, okay, we’ll ask.”

“Because you see, I think your reconstruction of the crime gets A for effort but D-minus for accuracy. You forgot to look at the records piled beside Marika’s little phonograph, too.”

“Records, yet? Why should I care if she liked swing or bebop or waltzes?”

They came out the front door, into the comparatively fresh air of Manhattan. “Well, Oscar. I did look! The victrola was merely a tool of her trade, to supply what mediums use for mood music. There was only one type of record in the apartment, so if Marika had a last dance with the man who killed her, then they danced to some nice old-fashioned hymn tune such as *Abide with Me* or *Shall We Gather at the River!*”

“I will not die, I must not; I am contracted  
To a young gentleman.”  
—*John Webster*

## 5.

THE TELEPHONE, OR MORE accurately Talleyrand’s hysterical yapping at the sound of its bell, awakened Miss Hildegard Withers almost immediately after she had given her hair its requisite hundred strokes and laid her weary head on the pillow. But somehow it had changed from night to broad daylight.

The retired schoolma’am sat up straight in bed, her first emotion one of deep disappointment. There had been times in the past when she had gone to sleep involved in a Gordian knot of puzzlement and wakened in the morning with everything unsnarled and clear. But the watched subconscious never boils. This just hadn’t been one of her nights. Even her dreams—and by her generally ragged feeling she deduced that she had had some dandy nightmares—had not left so much as a hoofprint behind.

Poodle and telephone bell were rendering a discordant duet now, with Talley carrying the tenor. “Quiet, you noisy things!” Miss Withers commanded in her best classroom voice. There was a moment of silence, and then as she leaned back toward the pillow the whole thing resumed. She creaked to her feet, found her robe and slippers and went out into the living room, picking up the instrument as gingerly as if it had really been the rattlesnake it sounded like.

The call, of course, would be from the Inspector, suing for peace. It had been very foolish of her to flare up last night and march off alone down Ninety-sixth Street in search of a taxi, but sometimes the man was unnecessarily exasperating. Still, he had his points.

“Good morning, Oscar!” she answered the phone, with forced brightness.

But it wasn’t the Inspector. It was Natalie Rowan in something of a dither. “Oh, Miss Withers—I called you last night, only you weren’t home. But something’s happened since then. You’ve seen the papers?”

“Already?” sighed Miss Withers to herself. “No,” she admitted. “I haven’t had a chance to look at *The Times* yet.”

“But I mean the afternoon papers!” So was the schoolteacher again reminded that she lived in an impatient era when the afternoon dailies were almost out in time for breakfast. “I see you haven’t,” Natalie continued breathlessly. “But do you remember my telling you about Marika, the medium?”

“The wonderful little woman up on Ninety-sixth Street?” Miss Withers remembered. She would until her dying day recall her one glimpse of Marika with her head bashed in.

“Yes, she’s *dead!*” announced Natalie Rowan. “Murdered in cold blood.” She hesitated. “I guess that makes it all pretty hopeless, doesn’t it? The police will think I just made it up, about what she told me. And there goes the last chance of having another séance, getting contact with Emil and having him tell us who really *did* kill that girl!”

The schoolteacher did not entirely agree. “I’m afraid you overestimate the importance of spirit messages, at least in the eyes of the police. If anything is to be done in this terribly difficult situation, it will have to be done by the living. Your husband still has four days, and while there’s life there’s hope.”

“Yes, but—” Natalie sounded uncomfortable. “It’s *so* disappointing! I’d been thinking that maybe we could have another séance or something and get all the suspects there on some pretext or other. Then we could have staged some sort of act that might make the murderer break down and confess, and it would all be over.”

“And it’s an idea,” admitted Miss Withers. “Though not a very original one. The person for whom we’re looking would certainly sense the trap. And I don’t think he’s the type to burst into tears and confess just because some ghostly voice said ‘Boo!’ at him.”

“But we have to do something!” cried Natalie desperately. “We can’t just wait—”

“Who,” inquired Miss Withers stiffly, “is waiting?”

“Oh, I don’t *know!* Maybe I should have hired private detectives, after all.”

“Perhaps you should,” admitted the schoolteacher with a slight chill in her voice. “I certainly have no objection. But having gone this far, I can’t let go. And I do think that I have one or two shots left in my locker. Besides,

may I point out to you that something *has* been accomplished? A murderer who has been lying doggo for over a year has been forced to come out into the open and make another move, and I think that happened as a result of my needling one of our three suspects. I'm not prepared to say which one of them, at the moment!"

"What? You mean the same person killed Midge Harrington and Marika too?" Natalie's voice was suddenly jubilant. "Then that *proves* Andy is innocent; they'll have to set him free!"

"It's not quite that simple," admitted Miss Withers deflatingly. "The Inspector doesn't seem as yet ready to accept my theory."

"You—you *know* about the murder and everything?"

"A little, thanks to a lucky accident. But I learned that the police lean toward the conclusion that Marika was done away with by some thug after her money."

"But Miss Withers, you're close to the Inspector. Can't you convince him—?"

"Oscar Piper is open to conviction, but just barely. What I believe and what I can prove are two very different things."

Natalie's despairing sigh could be heard over the phone.

"But cheer up," said the schoolteacher. "The police have a rather complete description of the killer, though I admit it doesn't seem to point *too* clearly at any one of our suspects. By the way, there are a couple of questions I must ask. First, who was it that told you about Marika and her occult powers?"

"Why—" There was a longish pause. "I don't exactly remember."

"But didn't you say a friend suggested it?"

"Yes, I know. But thinking it over, I guess I heard about Marika from my husband, I mean Andy. I don't mean that he consulted her or anything, but I think he knew somebody who did. I remembered his casual mention of the name, and later when I was so lost and miserable and had nowhere to turn I looked her up in the phone book ..."

"No! Go away!" said Miss Withers sharply. She was speaking to the poodle, who was licking her bare ankles to indicate that it was time for a walk or breakfast, preferably both. "Excuse me, Mrs. Rowan. My other question is—how does one reach Iris Dunn? Do you have her address and phone number?"

“Of course,” said Natalie, and gave them from memory. “But you probably won’t find her home. I tried and tried to get hold of her last evening, but she was out gallivanting somewhere. No answer this morning, either.”

“Youth will be youth,” Miss Withers told her philosophically. “Or at least so I’ve heard. Was it something important you wanted Iris for?”

“I—I don’t know. But when I didn’t hear from you yesterday I got to thinking. It seemed to me that all along Iris had maybe been holding out about someone or something in Midge’s past. Like she did about Mr. Zotos, until you pried it out of her. And sometimes she seems so frank, and then again she just freezes up and says she doesn’t remember something I feel she knows perfectly well ...”

“Is this just intuition, or have you something specific?”

Natalie hesitated. “Let me see. I remember one time I was asking her all sorts of questions about the Harrington girl and her men friends, and Iris mentioned some flowers that came one morning for Midge shortly after they started to room together. A wonderful spray of white orchids on the day *after* Easter, of all the odd times. She said Midge went to bed and cried most of the rest of the day, with the orchids pinned to her nightgown. But Iris said she couldn’t remember the name of the man who sent them, though there was a look in her eye—”

“I know that look,” Miss Withers told her. The ghost of a thought flicked through her mind, but it was gone before she could nab it. “Well, perhaps there’s a romantic side to Miss Dunn. And as for being out, one can’t blame her for burning the candle a bit at her age. She wasn’t out all night, was she?”

Natalie admitted she didn’t know about that. She had called the girl three or four times with no answer, had even gone downtown to her apartment and hammered on the door. Then she had called Miss Withers for no particular reason except that she felt in need of spiritual comfort, and finally in desperation had gone to a movie. “There was a murder mystery on a double bill, and I thought I might learn something. But I had to sit through almost all of *Samson and Delilah* first, and that was awful. It didn’t follow the book except at the end, and Hedy Lamarr kept reminding me all the time of the Harrington girl and what she did to my Andy—” Natalie gulped. “And the other picture, why it turned out that the murderer was really one of the victims; she got mixed up and drank a cocktail she’d poisoned for



somebody else. You see, there was this midget in love with an opera singer —”

“I’d love to hear all about it, but right now I’m busy,” interrupted Miss Withers firmly. “And I suggest that you leave Iris Dunn to me. Perhaps she has to be approached roundabout, like Peer and the Boyd in the Ibsen play.”

“Oh yes! *The Return of Peer Grimm*. Emil and I went to it years ago. That’s a play about a ghost, too—”

The schoolteacher felt that her quota of ghosts and ghostly messages was full up for the moment. “You’ll hear from me,” she promised. “Meanwhile take a sedative.”

“But I did, last night!” cried Natalie. “I took two Seconals, and I had a dream about Marika coming into my bedroom with a lighted candle and whispering ‘I know now!’ She was dead by that time, wasn’t she? So maybe her spirit really did come—”

“Mrs. Rowan, *please!*”

“Well, anyway, I shrieked, ‘If you know, then who *was* it?’ so loud that I woke myself up!”

“Too bad you didn’t take *three* Seconal tablets—you might have dreamed the rest of it. Goodbye again, Mrs. Rowan.”

Sometimes, she felt, Natalie was almost too much to cope with. But, of course, the poor woman was undergoing something of an ordeal, made worse by the crushing realization that she had misjudged her Andy. Still, she had supplied one or two more pieces to fit into the jigsaw puzzle Andy Rowan had known about Marika. Maybe he had gone to consult her in that apartment where she died. Or maybe some friend of his, somebody he knew very well, had been one of the mystic’s wide circle of clients.

“It might even have been the Harrington girl,” Miss Withers observed conversationally to the impatient poodle as she hastily flung on her clothes preparatory to taking him out. “Maybe Midge went to Marika—they say that people in show business are usually superstitious. Marika would have drawn her out and found what she wanted most to hear, then looked in the crystal or read the Runes and told her that she was fated to marry a dark, slight, curly-haired man with a dimple. Meaning Andy Rowan. Maybe Midge even came back and told her lover that she’d been to a soothsayer and that Fate had destined him to be hers? Maybe—” she stopped and shook her head. “Too many maybes.”

When mistress and frisking dog returned from a brisk go around the block they found the Inspector on the doorstep, looking pleased as Punch. “Just on my way uptown,” he said. “Thought I’d stop in—”

“For a cup of coffee, of course.” Miss Withers led him inside. “Care for a bite of breakfast?”

“Breakfast, yet! I had lunch half an hour ago.”

“Probably a stale sandwich on the edge of your desk, I know your habits.” She looked at him critically. “Oscar, you look like the canary that ate the cat. Don’t tell me you’ve already got Marika’s murderer arrested?”

“As good as,” he said confidently. “Hildegarde, you’re always poking fun at scientific police methods, but just listen to this. Remember that hat? I just got the laboratory to report on it.”

“So now at last we know the murderer’s head size!”

But nothing could ruffle him. “Yes, six and seven-eighths. About right for the man’s height. But the hat was bought in Dallas, Texas, about six or seven years ago—we know that because the model was discontinued during the war. It retailed at around thirty dollars but had never been blocked or cleaned, which means that the owner was flush with money at times but not recently. A five-dollar bill was tucked inside the sweatband, soggy and discolored and evidently been there for years. Maybe the guy originally hid it there so he’d never be out of taxi fare or the price of a bottle, and then forgot it. Traces of cheap brilliantine and expensive hair restorer. A few light brown hairs left over from his last haircut, which was about a week ago. The vacuum picked up minute traces of powder, alfalfa, and camel dung.”

“He probably only walked through the Zoo on a windy day.”

The Inspector put down his coffee cup, and tackled bacon and eggs. “Seriously, Hildegarde, we know a lot more about our man. He was in Texas five or six years ago, and flush. He’s had hard times since. He’s careful of his appearance and worried about losing his hair, which is light brown. Maybe you’re right about the Zoo—but he powders his forehead after shaving, which most men don’t bother to. With that on top of Mrs. Fink’s description, it should be a cinch.”

“Perhaps, Oscar. *Cinch* is hardly the word I’d choose for any angle of this affair. By the way, has the landlady identified any photographs yet?”

“The old girl is down there now, plowing through the racks. Nothing definite when I left the office, but Sergeant Smith says she had one

*possible*. Only that guy has been out at Alcatraz for a couple of years, so she's looking further. Of course, the photo angle may come to nothing. The killer may be a first offender."

She sniffed meaningly. "I doubt it. He killed Midge Harrington a year ago." Miss Withers poured out more coffee. "Of course, Oscar, you forgot all about my request to ask the three people who discovered Marika's body about which one of them unbolted the hall door of the apartment."

"Wrong again. We did, but they were all so excited at discovering the corpse that none of them can actually swear to it. Mrs. Fink thinks it was her husband, and the husband thinks it was Bagmann. They were all in a tearing hurry to get out of that room and downstairs to call the cops."

"Odd, with a phone right there in the room."

"So for once somebody was smart enough not to touch anything on the scene of the crime!"

"I see. And just for the record did you do any checking to see if Messrs. Sprott, Bruner and Zotos had alibis for last night?"

"I've had more important things to do! Hildegarde, once and for all will you stop trying to connect two murders that just won't tie together? Besides, you yourself admit that the description of the murderer doesn't fit any of your Three Musketeers."

"Except for the Cyrano nose, it could be any of them—even Bruner in spite of his height, because he could have hunched down in the trenchcoat and it's hard to estimate tallness on a stairway, especially a dark stairway. Oscar, I've thought and thought about it. Isn't it possible that the nose was make-up? Years and years ago I saw a movie called *The Sign of the Cross*, with Charles Laughton as a wonderfully dissolute Nero, and he had a beautiful Roman nose that couldn't have been natural."

"Face putty," Piper told her wisely. "Actors sometimes use it, though it won't stand too close inspection. But remember, Marika let the guy into the house and into her apartment because she knew him. If he'd been wearing the wrong phiz when she opened the door—"

It was a point well taken, she could hardly deny that. There would hardly have been time for the murderer to do a reverse-action make-up job at the head of the stairs before he knocked at Marika's door. But still there seemed something a little too *too* about the nose. Of course, there were people with beaks that seemed an exaggeration—the late J. P. Morgan was one.

The Inspector drained his coffee cup and said he had to run along. “Are you on your way back up to Marika’s apartment?” Miss Withers asked eagerly.

He nodded. “Got a box of her personal papers and stuff out in the car that I want to take back. Nothing in them that seemed much help, though. Except a lot of receipts for postal money orders—seems she’s been sending dough to some guy out in Phoenix, Arizona, name of Cawthorne.”

Miss Withers’ eyes narrowed. “Does it look like blackmail? I thought from what you said about mediums that they preyed on others instead of being preyed upon.”

“Don’t be always jumping to conclusions,” Piper said wearily. “Maybe she was only making payments on a dude ranch so she could retire someday. We’ve asked the Phoenix police to investigate, of course. As for the rest of her correspondence, it was mostly from clients who wanted their fortunes told or their horoscopes read by mail.”

“Horoscopes too? Heavens, that woman seems to have rung all the changes. By any chance did she tell the auguries by studying chicken entrails?”

“Maybe. But she couldn’t have been much good at it, because she certainly didn’t have any warning of her own fate. All of which proves that any message she got from the spooks about Andy Rowan’s innocence was worth less than a Confederate dollar.”

“Oscar, perhaps you don’t know that Confederate paper money is now a collector’s item?”

“All right, all *right!*” Piper paused in the doorway, a truculent gleam in his eye. “And I don’t mind telling you that while I’m up there in the dead woman’s apartment I’m going to check very carefully through those victrola records again. Maybe there was a dance tune tucked in among the hymns, and you missed it. We’re all only human, you know.”

“Speak for yourself,” snapped Hildegard Withers. “For your information I still have 20/20 vision, and can tell a hawk from a handsaw, or sacred from profane music. I can also remember enough of my own salad days to realize that when a man and woman dance together, especially alone in an apartment, they have certain romantic interests. The man who came to Marika’s apartment and bashed out her brains was nobody she cared a tinker’s damn about. I call your attention to the curious incident of the lipstick in the night time.”

“But Marika wasn’t wearing any lipstick!”

“That was the curious incident. Curious, I mean, if she was in a flirtatious mood. You may know a lot about crime, Oscar, but you don’t know women.”

“I am learning,” he said. “The hard way.” And he took himself off.

Miss Hildegard Withers wasted no time in following his example, except that she headed in an entirely different direction. The time had come, she thought, to have a long heart-to-heart talk with Iris Dunn, who might just possibly have something up her sleeve besides a well-rounded arm.

At least Natalie thought so. And Natalie Rowan wasn’t entirely the garrulous fool she sometimes sounded.

The schoolteacher finally arrived at a vast building taking up an entire block on the middle-lower West Side, built in the ’30s when architects who should have known better were bandying phrases about “modern multiple housing” and “machines for living.” She took the elevator to the 18th floor and knocked sharply on a door at the end of a long corridor. Almost immediately the lid of a metal peephole opened, and a young, strained voice cried, “Who is it?”

“It is I, as you can see for yourself,” said Miss Withers. “May I come in?”

There was the rattle of a chain, and the door opened slowly, reluctantly, as though Iris Dunn would have slammed it in the schoolteacher’s face had she dared. “I thought you were somebody else,” the girl admitted.

“Sometimes I wish I were,” said Miss Withers as she pushed forward into a smallish living room whose wall bed was still down. “Whom were you expecting?”

“Oh—the rental agent,” Iris said.

Sensitive as a cat to her surroundings, Miss Withers felt a tingling up her spine as the door closed behind her. Something was wrong here, very wrong. As the Inspector would say, the joint was jumping, alive with vibrations. It was not just that the room was a shambles of strewn clothing and feminine belongings, with a portable phonograph, trimmed in red leather, playing *You’d Be So Easy to Love* ... The bed was covered with dozens of varicolored evening gowns, the floor cluttered with a heap of framed photographs, most of them autographed by second-magnitude stage

and variety stars, which Iris had evidently been trying to tie together with string and newspaper padding.

“Down come the Lares and Penates, eh? Is it moving day?”

“Oh, sure,” said Iris, too brightly, as she shut off the music. “My lease, you know.”

“A nice little furnished flat, isn’t it?” Miss Withers could see partway into a bare little kitchenette, and through an open door into a large and almost luxurious dressing room and bath. “Too bad you have to lose it.”

The girl fidgeted. “Yes, but the place is inconveniently located, you know. It isn’t within walking distance of anything, except maybe Macy’s when there’s a good tail wind.” Iris dumped an armful of summer dresses into an expanding suitcase, every which way.

“Today’s the sixteenth of the month, is it not? Odd that your lease doesn’t end on the first or fifteenth, as they usually do.”

The girl stood stock still. “Why—” She was wound up tight as a spring, hiding something behind a smile that never quite took. Somehow, while perhaps she did not seem as poised and pretty as she had at their first meeting, now she was considerably more engaging, a little younger and more natural. “You know show business,” she said with assumed lightness. “Here today and gone tomorrow.”

“I’ll not keep you long,” said Miss Withers as she removed four pairs of dancing shoes from a chair and planted herself firmly. “So you’ve changed your mind about remaining in the city and are going to take a job with a road company?” She showed her surprise. “And all the time I figured you might have had personal, shall I say romantic reasons for wanting to stay in hot, stuffy New York all this past summer.”

“Not exactly a road company—” Iris began, and stopped.

“Summer stock—in September?”

“No! I’m just going away, if you must know. Hollywood, maybe. I’ve never tried Hollywood.”

“Many others have, particularly in these days of television, without setting the Los Angeles riverbed on fire. But it’s a place to go, especially when one wants to forget a dead romance.” She stared hard at Iris.

“Romance? Heavens, no. Whatever gave you that idea? I’m the bachelor girl type—”

“So I see by the collection of evening dresses spread out for packing. Was it something that happened last evening that changed your mind about

staying in town?”

Iris dropped an armful of dresses, with a clatter of hangers. “What?” She swallowed. “Why should it?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” admitted the inquisitive schoolteacher quietly. “Only you do seem a bit wrought-up today. Did some young man forget to send you an orchid, or—”

“I hate orchids! They give me the creeps. And I tell you there *isn’t* any young man! I only wish there was!”

“Was it something that happened when you were out last evening—?”

The girl shook her head, harder than seemed actually necessary. “I wasn’t out, I was home all the time!” she said firmly.

The Withers eyebrows went up. “But child—”

“Oh so it was *you* that called, then!” Iris said too quickly. “I just—well, I had a headache and didn’t feel like answering the phone, that’s all.”

“And having thought things all over here alone with your headache last evening, you came to the conclusion that you ought to stop trying to help poor Mrs. Rowan and me solve the Harrington case, and go gallivanting off to Hollywood?”

Iris came closer, eyes blazing. “That isn’t true! You don’t understand. Why should I get mixed up in a thing like that—I’m not a detective or anything. I didn’t know Midge Harrington very well, and I wish I’d never heard of her at all. I—”

“Just how did you two meet, by the way? I’m not just curious, I’m fishing for possible leads.”

Iris sighed wearily. “Oh, the usual thing. It was one of those revival weeks when they were trying to get vaudeville back at the Palace. They dug up some acrobats and a Swami who did mind reading and magic and a trained dog act and all the old corny stuff. I was playing a stooge, a straight woman, for Flip Jayen, the comic with the big cigar ...”

“I thought they all used cigars,” put in Miss Withers.

“Not as big as his. Midge was in a dance act, though she only did one harem number and then a sort of poor man’s Denishawn scarf thing. We got acquainted, and when the week ended and the thing folded we decided to move in together to save money. It was just after she’d busted up with Riff Sprott.”

“I see. It must be fascinating to be in the theater. One meets such interesting people.”

“That’s what you think,” Iris told her bitterly. “The girls are mostly birdbrained and the men are all so much in love with themselves they have nothing left over. All I’ve ever wanted to do was to kiss show business goodbye and settle down in the suburbs—”

“With a husband and a bassinette and a window-box full of petunias?” The schoolteacher nodded. “They say it’s nice work if you can get it, though I wouldn’t know. But first things first. You have honest eyes, young lady, and I believe you have a conscience. I can’t believe that you are seriously considering running away right at this time, when we are tottering on the brink of success. How can you let down poor Mrs. Rowan, and that man in the death-house? Things are beginning to happen—”

“And *what* things!” Iris shuddered.

“You mean the murder last night. Yes, the man who killed your former roommate has now made the major mistake of coming out into the open again. I feel in my bones that it is a direct result of the conference we had the other day in Mrs. Rowan’s living room, and what came after. Even if the police are still too myopic to realize the significance, we three women can still alone and unaided—”

“We too can be corpses this new easy way!” the girl interrupted wildly. “Save the rest of the pep talk, I don’t want to do or die for dear old Rutgers.” She came close to her obviously unwelcome visitor. “Do you want to know really why I’m running away? It’s because I’m simply scared witless, that’s why. Do you want to know why I’m even afraid to answer my phone or my doorbell? Because the murderer knows my phone number, he knows where I live!”

Miss Hildegard Withers cocked her head on one side, like a curious bird. “But I don’t see—after all, anyone can look in a phone book or dial Information.”

“You still don’t understand. He—he actually *called* me!”

The schoolteacher leaned back and took a deep breath. “At last!” she whispered. “Now we’re getting somewhere. He called you and tried to scare you off? What did he say? What was his voice like? How do you know it was the murderer?”

“I just know!” Iris blurted out. “I don’t want to talk about it, I don’t want to think about it even. The first time was early this morning. The phone rang and I picked it up and answered, and I—I heard somebody laughing.”



“*Laughing?* But—”

“I knew you’d think what you’re thinking. Anybody would. That’s why I didn’t report it to the police. I thought at first that it was just some drunk with the wrong number, or a crossed wire or somebody clowning. But it sounded sort of *wrong*, somehow.” Iris bit her knuckle. “I hung up and tried to forget it. And then about an hour ago, just when I was in the middle of reading in the paper all about what happened to that Marika woman, the phone rang again. I thought it was—well, I thought it was somebody I knew, so I picked it up. And there he was *laughing again*.”

“You said *he*?” asked Miss Withers soberly.

“It was a man, all right. But I can’t describe it. It was funny laughter, not funny ha-ha but funny peculiar. I dropped the phone, and when I picked it up two or three minutes later it was still going on, believe it or not. So I admit it, I’m scared. See why I’m packing? I’m afraid to stay here alone. I don’t want to wait and be killed like Midge Harrington, and Marika last night. I don’t want to play detective. I’m too young to be murdered, I want to live and have wonderful things happen to me, I want to get married someday and—” Suddenly the girl flung herself face down on the bed, completely unwound.

“Get control of yourself,” snapped the schoolteacher. “We are dealing with a very nasty specimen indeed, but if he had any intention of murdering you he’d be at it, wouldn’t he, instead of wasting his time on pointless, anonymous phone calls?”

Iris remained uncomfortable.

“What probably happened is that your telephone line is out of order, and when somebody calls you, instead of hearing them you just hear a sort of howling on the line—like static on the radio or snowflakes on a television screen.”

Iris reached out blindly and mopped her eyes with something. Or *was* it so blindly, Miss Withers wondered—for the girl’s fumbling hand had somehow avoided clutching the chartreuse satin of what was obviously one of her best evening dresses and had caught up a cotton blouse.

“A nice performance, Miss Dunn,” said the schoolteacher as she rose to her feet. “But the audience is walking out. Laughter over the telephone indeed!” She stalked out and closed the door firmly. Halfway down the hall she stopped, tapped her front teeth with a fingernail, and then tiptoed back.

Even with her ear to the panel of the door she could hear nothing inside. But a little adroit manipulation with a hairpin pushed back the metal cover of the peephole in the door—not enough so she could actually see into the apartment, but enough so she could now finally hear Iris’ voice, low and desperate.

“... can’t wait until tonight. Bill, you’ve simply got to come now, right this minute ...” She must be on the phone, then, having made a quick recovery from her fit of the vapors. But her voice was jagged as broken glass. “No, I’m not packed, but I’ll throw the stuff together somehow. What? No, not that again. But The Hat was just here snooping around, and, darling, I’m positive she’s beginning to suspect!” The rest of it was of a more intimate nature, and Miss Withers removed the hairpin and went quietly back down the hall.

“I certainly am beginning to suspect,” she said to herself. “But just *what?*”

She lurked in the downstairs lobby for exactly thirty-one minutes, and then pretended to be deeply interested in the names on the mailboxes when a young man came dashing madly in from the street and headed for the automatic elevator. Miss Withers watched calmly while the indicator rose to the 18th floor level and stopped.

“Check,” said the schoolteacher, making mental note of the fact that Iris Dunn’s Bill was tall, thin, and underfed; affected a worn tweed jacket and stained flannels, could have done with a haircut, especially on his upper lip. Hardly, she thought, a tower of strength for Iris in her hour of need.

Besides, she had seen him before. On the very first day of this investigation she had run into him at the back door of Natalie Rowan’s house. Only then he had said he was reading the gas meter.

Which seemed very unlikely. Young men who read meters do not drive expensive new automobiles. She had no doubts whatever about which one was his. A long yellow teardrop stood in a no-parking zone a little way down the street, its lines so contrived that it seemed to be moving when it was standing still. Around it a small group of neighborhood children were gathered.

“It’s a Jaguar, ma’am,” announced one grubby urchin. “British job, guaranteed to do over a hunnert ’n thirty.” Miss Withers nodded, and copied down the license number.

“All things have two handles; beware of the wrong one.”  
—Emerson

## 6.

“DON’T MOVE!” SAID THE Inspector from the doorway as he returned to his office later that afternoon. Miss Withers, who had been shamelessly peering at the papers laid out on his official desk, gasped and started.

“Because I always want to remember you just the way you are this moment,” said the little Irishman melodramatically. Then his voice changed from syrup to sandpaper. “With your long nose in somebody else’s private business, as usual!”

The schoolteacher swiftly regained her composure, and sniffed a scornful sniff. “Sticks and stones,” she reminded him. “At least, Oscar, it’s a pleasant change for once to come into your office and not have you make rude remarks about my hat.”

Piper registered mock surprise. “Is that a *hat*? I thought maybe it was just some flotsam and jetsam left behind by the tide.” Then he dropped down behind his battered old oak desk, and sighed.

There was an odd light in Miss Withers’ eye, but she only said, “What’s the matter, Oscar? No arrest yet in the Marika murder?”

He shook his head. “I just came back from the photo files. That Fink woman ought to crawl back in the funny papers where she belongs. The boys showed her over three thousand photographs, all men known to have been mixed up in crimes of violence against women, and she can’t make up her mind about any of ’em. First she thinks maybe and then she thinks no. And then she complains that the pictures are beginning to make her eyes tired and can’t she please go home and come back some other day.”

“One can hardly blame the poor creature,” said Miss Withers sympathetically. “Three thousand plug-ugly criminal faces in one session —”

“It’s her duty as a citizen to cooperate with the police!”

“Assuredly. But when *I* try to cooperate you say I’m interfering.” She nodded toward his desk. “I see you got a report from Phoenix.”

“You don’t miss much, do you? Too bad I don’t keep a diary in my bottom desk drawer, you’d probably have skimmed through that too!”

“I’m afraid at your age, Oscar, your diary would be about as spicy as the almanac. Very well, I’m sorry I peeked. But I don’t see why you mind my knowing that the Phoenix police report that David Cawthorne, 56, no criminal record, was a patient in a TB sanitarium there until two weeks ago, when he left one night late without the formality of being discharged. It’s a blind alley anyway—you can’t believe that the man got angry because Marika stopped sending him money, sneaked out of the hospital, and then hitchhiked his way back to New York City just to kill her, do you?”

“Say, that’s not a bad idea at that, we’ll look into it. Anyway, somebody did. Kill her, I mean.”

“And this is one crime you can’t pin on Andrew Rowan, because he’s still locked up in the death-house!”

He shrugged. “Rowan is the least of my troubles, now.”

“Perhaps. Yet, if the man is actually executed next Monday, and then later it all comes out that he was innocent, how do you suppose you’ll sleep at night?”

“*Lousy*, just like I do now!” But the Inspector gave her an odd look. “See here, Hildegarde, all kidding aside. Are you just still playing a wild hunch, or do you know something I don’t know?” He took out a cigar and studied it searchingly, as if he expected to find a worm in it. “Look, I haven’t forgotten about that trick will of Rowan’s. And remembering some of the rabbits you’ve pulled out of the hat in the past, I have a certain healthy respect for your feminine intuition or whatever you call it. If you could give me one simple solitary fact pointing to his innocence—”

“But facts aren’t always simple and solitary, Oscar. Anyway, I guess it’s time to break the news to you that I didn’t drop in just to peek at your desk and needle you about the progress you’re not making. I came to report a threat.”

“A which?”

“To report threatening telephone calls made this morning to Miss Iris Dunn, the girl who’s been trying to help Mrs. Rowan and me get to the real truth about the Harrington murder.”

“Oh, yes, the roommate. She inherited Midge’s personal stuff, because there weren’t any relatives. A giddy type, I remember her at the morgue. You should have seen her—”

“Save it for your reminiscences. Oscar, I’m trying to tell you something important, something that makes me so mad inside I could *spit!*” And she went on to tell about her surprise visit to Iris’ apartment.

“Let me get this straight, so there isn’t any mistake,” Piper said with obvious masculine superiority when she had finally run down. “You say the phone rang and the girl answered and she heard a man laughing. He called again this morning, still laughing. Is *that* all?”

“I confess it doesn’t sound like much, the way you put it. But, Oscar, she said it was very peculiar laughter.”

“*She* says! A hysterical snip of a girl—”

“Well, *I’m* not a hysterical snip of a girl, as you very well know! Oscar, in all your experience have you ever run into anything like that, where somebody just calls up and then laughs on and on and on?”

“I have not. And I don’t believe that anybody else has either.” He smiled a superior smile.

“Don’t be in a hurry to lay bets on that,” Miss Withers told him grimly. “I confess that at one time I almost made the same mistake you’re making. I thought Iris was simply dramatizing, making it all up just as an excuse to back out of the whole thing. I should have realized that it would take something drastic to make a down-at-the-heels actress turn her back on a nice cut of a twenty-thousand-dollar reward, which is what Natalie Rowan has offered.”

“Wow!” the Inspector said, opening his eyes.

“Yes, Oscar, wow. But listen. When I got home this afternoon and was right in the middle of washing up our brunch dishes, *my* phone rang! I dried my hands as fast as I could and hurried out into the living room—you know how Talley always gets excited when the phone rings, and barks and paws at it and sometimes even knocks it off the hook? I picked it up and said hello and then—well, Oscar, I heard something I never heard before, something I’ll remember to my dying day.”

“A proposal?”

But she sailed on, not deigning to notice the jibe. “Oscar, it was a man—laughing. He didn’t say anything, he just laughed. It was heavy, strange, horrible laughter, like a drunken idiot’s.”

The Inspector looked sharply at her. “Hildegarde, are you all right?”

“I’m as all right as anybody could be who heard that awful bellowing. It was inhuman, it was ghoulish and evil, like laughter bubbling up from the

deep wells of hell.”

“Come, come,” said Piper uncomfortably. “Nerves—”

“Stuff and nonsense! I have no more nerves than a baked potato. Besides, what about Talley? Is my poodle having a nervous breakdown too?”

“How could anybody tell?” the Inspector said. “That fool dog—”

“Talley isn’t a fool, except in the classical sense. He’s a clown, a cheerful extroverted clown. Listen. I told you how interested he always is in the telephone, especially when one doesn’t answer it right away. As I sat there holding the instrument and shivering in my boots at that awful sound that went on and on longer than any normal human being could laugh without choking or stopping for breath, I held the phone down to Talley’s ear to see if he heard it too or if maybe I was ready for a straitjacket. Do you know what he did? Oscar, as heaven is my witness, he just shut his eyes, opened his mouth—”

“And yawned?”

“And *howled*, Oscar! A dreadful, thin, agonized howl such as I’ve never heard him let loose since the violinist upstairs moved away. So there!” She sat back in her chair, and waited.

“Well,” said the Inspector after a moment, “that’s a new one on me. I don’t suppose the Bell System has suddenly hooked up the tie-lines with Gehenna. Maybe this is a case for a psychiatrist—oh, I don’t mean to psychoanalyze you or your dog. But any murder that gets into the papers attracts a lot of half-demented people. They start coming down here and confessing, or else they claim they’re a reincarnation of the victim or something equally screwy. This business sounds to me like the work of some nut, who ought to be certified and on his way to Matteawan.”

“And how, pray, would this so-called nut of yours know that Iris Dunn and I are the only two people who are trying to help Natalie Rowan reopen that old murder case?”

“How do I know?” snapped Piper irritably. “How does anybody know what a madman knows—or will do in a given situation?” He blew a large but ragged smoke ring. “The thing just doesn’t make sense. Are you trying to suggest that the murderer of Marika is so afraid of you two women that he’s trying to scare you off by calling up and giving you the eerie ha-ha?”

“I’m not suggesting at the moment. I’m insisting that you must find out where those calls are coming from. You must tap our telephone lines

and put policemen there to listen—”

“Sure, sure!” he cried. “Your phone and the girl’s and I suppose Mrs. Rowan’s too—with eight-hour shifts that’s nine men pulled off their beats, sitting around some cellar wearing earphones on the long chance that some nut, who has nothing to do with the murder, will call up again and pull his phony act. And if we did tap the lines the listening officers wouldn’t hear anything more than you hear. We’ve got an automatic dial system in New York, remember. There’s no way on God’s green earth for them to check back through the robot switchboards in time to find out where the call is originating.”

“Oh,” said the schoolteacher, deflated.

“Besides,” the Inspector went on soberly, ‘look at this angle. Just suppose for the sake of argument that the same man killed Midge Harrington and Marika Thoren. Why would he go calling attention to himself by those phone calls made to the women who are trying to link the murders? He’d want to sit tight and let Rowan be executed, wouldn’t he? No, Hildegarde, I stick with my theory that it was just some demented joker. If he calls you again, interrupt! Get him to say something, so you can hear his voice.”

The schoolteacher gave him a look. “Oscar, that’s easy to say, but you haven’t heard that laughter. It would be like—like trying to interrupt Niagara Falls or a hurricane or hell’s bells ringing in the rafters ...”

“Take it easy!” Piper looked worried. “This has really got under your skin, hasn’t it?” He stood up quickly. “Let me get you a nice glass of cold water.”

“I do not have the slightest desire for a glass of cold water!”

The two old friends glared at each other for a moment, and then the tension was broken by a dark young man in shirt sleeves and uniform trousers who poked his head in the door and said, “Oh! Busy, Inspector?”

“Not at all!” Piper assured him heartily, obviously and unflatteringly happy at the interruption. “Come on in, Gino. Got anything yet?”

The newcomer carried a big block of drawing paper under his arm. “Maybe, sir.” He shrugged expressive Latin shoulders.

“Gino’s our anatomist,” the Inspector observed to Miss Withers. “Started out to be a sculptor and wound up in the Department. You should see him reconstruct a face with clay and stuff when he has nothing to start with but a moldy old skull—” He took the drawing block and studied it

thoughtfully. “Not bad, not bad at all. Recognize him, Hildegarde?” He turned the pad in her direction, and she saw a pencil drawing of the head and shoulders of a stocky man in trenchcoat and wide-brimmed hat, a man wearing heavy-rimmed glasses above a truly remarkable nose.

“I recognize the hat at any rate,” admitted the schoolteacher. She squinted, trying to see Riff Sprott, or Nils Bruner, or even little George Zotos in the rough sketch. Then she shook her head.

“None of your Three Musketeers? That’s what I thought.” Piper pressed a button on his desk, “Smitty? Have the Fink woman brought back over here.”

They sat in silence. “Oscar,” said the schoolteacher, “while you’re not busy there’s an auto license number I’d like you to check for me.” She handed him a slip of paper. “Would it be too much trouble to find out who owns this car?”

“Sure, sure.” Piper took it, and then stuck it on a spike on his desk when Mrs. Fink was ushered in. But the landlady was evidently fed up with the police and out of sorts with everything. She absolutely refused to look at anything more until she had a cigarette, a cup of coffee, and a nip. However, she finally settled for the first two items and a promise of the other on her way home—just as soon as she had made her decision as to how close the artist had come to re-creating her description of the man who had passed her on the stairs last night.

“Beautiful!” was her first verdict. She stared at Gino, obviously surprised that he didn’t wear a beret, a Windsor tie, and a smock. “You did that?”

“What we want, Mrs. Fink, is for you to tell us what changes the artist should make. All we have to go on is the hat, and your description in your statement.”

“Well,” the woman said doubtfully, “the hat’s wrong.”

Miss Withers choked, and the Inspector said, “Wrong? But that’s the one thing we’re sure of!”

Mrs. Fink shook her head stubbornly. “It’s still wrong.”

“If I might make a suggestion,” put in the schoolteacher gently, “perhaps the brim was turned down?”

“Try it, Gino,” ordered Piper wearily.

The young man took a bit of blackened gum from his pocket, magically removed the brim of the hat, and turned it down in front with a



few quick strokes of a soft black pencil.

“Better,” admitted Mrs. Fink judicially, as she sipped her coffee. “But I think maybe it was down in back too.”

Gino attended to that. “Anything else wrong?” the Inspector demanded.

Mrs. Fink labored long, and finally decided that the mouth was too large, also the ears. Swiftly the pencil made changes, corrections. “The eyes are too wide apart,” she said. “And—” She stopped, uncertain.

“And what?”

The man I saw coming up the stairs looked cold, somehow,” admitted the landlady. “You know, like people look coming in out of a snowstorm?”

“But there wasn’t any snowstorm,” Inspector Piper objected. “Look, lady, it’s been a warm September!—”

“Wait, Oscar,” put in Miss Withers. “I think I know what she means. When my pupils used to come in off the playground on a cold winter day their noses and sometimes their ears were almost white. Do you suppose —?”

The Inspector nodded to Gino, who swiftly made nose and ears several shades lighter than the rest of the pictured face. “Now that’s *him!*” sighed Mrs. Fink in weary approval.

“Okay, Gino, wrap it up.” As the artist spread a protecting coat of fixative over the drawing from a little atomizer from his pocket, Piper pressed a button on his desk, “Smitty? Order a car and have somebody take Mrs. Fink up to Ninety-sixth Street. Oh yes, and first she’s to have one for the road, understand ...?”

But Sergeant Smith, instead of being where he belonged at the other end of the line, was standing in the open doorway, a hopeful smile on his face. “Is it all right for me to take her up myself, sir? I live up that way, and I’m off duty anyway in half an hour.”

“Why—” the Inspector frowned, and then said, “Okay, okay.” He turned to Miss Withers. “You want a free ride uptown too?”

The schoolteacher declined with thanks, feeling in no mood for racing through late afternoon traffic in a police car with sirens screaming. Then she noticed that the sergeant, about to usher Mrs. Fink triumphantly out through the door, had stopped short to stare at the drawing propped up against the Inspector’s desk. Smitty walked slowly toward it, whistling.

“Hello!” cried the brisk young officer. “If it isn’t Banana-Nose! What’s my old pal been up to now?”

“Judas-Priest-in-a-jug!” whispered the Inspector after a moment of turgid silence. “Smitty—do you actually—I mean, do you recognize this face?”

“Why, sure.” Sergeant Smith closed his eyes, snapped his chubby fingers, and rattled off: “Rollo Banana-Nose Wilson alias Rob Wills, age about 36, numerous arrests as cat-burglar and second-storey worker, served four years Auburn and minimum of three to ten Sing Sing, now out on parole.” He opened his eyes and smiled. Miss Withers half-expected him to run forward toward the audience, arms outstretched for applause, like an oldtime vaudeville acrobat.

“Okay, *okay!*” Inspector Piper, whose memory was not quite what it once had been, often found the sergeant’s demonstrations useful, but they always rubbed him the wrong way all the same. “Was this Banana-Nose Wilson ever accused of any strong-arm stuff, especially involving women?”

Smitty looked blank. “Not as far as I know. As a rule most sneak-thieves avoid crimes of physical violence, going unarmed and trusting to stealth—” The sergeant was going good on chapter three of “the book” but the Inspector, who had after all helped to write it, cut him off with a curt nod. He was already on the phone, demanding records and photographs of Rollo Wilson.

“We had you looking in the wrong photo classification, Mrs. Fink,” he told the woman. “If you’ll just wait here a few minutes—”

Mrs. Fink, who had little or no choice in the matter, waited long enough to take a look at the photographs, front and profile, of Banana-Nose—and to admit wearily that apart from his not wearing hat or glasses, he looked like the man who had passed her on the stairs on his way up to Marika’s apartment.

Piper was beaming. “Smitty, give her *two* for the road before you take her home,” he commanded. “And an egg in her beer if she wants it.” He turned to the talk-box. “Pick-up order on Rollo Banana-Nose Wilson. To all precincts, sheriffs’ offices and state police, greater metropolitan area. Arrest on suspicion of homicide. Take no chances, this man is dangerous and may be armed ...” He turned and whispered as a jubilant aside to Miss Withers, “Say, when we were arguing last night did I say something about having the

killer in forty-eight hours? Make it twenty-four! Now what have you got to say about the police machine at work?"

The schoolteacher sniffed, but realized as she did so that it was not one of her more convincing efforts. The moments when Hildegard Withers was nonplused were few and far between, but this time she was downstairs and waiting for a taxi before she thought of an adequate comeback.

"Police machine indeed!" she said. "It's pure Rube Goldberg! From a crumpled hat and a description of a man seen momentarily on a dark stairway comes an artist's sketch, and purely by accident an eager-beaver desk officer gets a peek at it and thinks maybe it looks like some obscure criminal he once saw somewhere, and now that poor unfortunate Mr. Banana-Nose is going to be rounded up and arrested and charged with the murder of Marika Thoren. He'll, of course, prove his innocence eventually—" She stopped. But would he? Andy Rowan hadn't.

Standing on that lonely, windswept street corner, Miss Withers suddenly felt very lost and ineffectual. Her world was out of joint. "Oh cursed spite," she said aloud, "that ever I was born to set it right. *Hamlet*."

A taxi-driver, who had pulled up and stopped just in time to catch the last of her soliloquy, eyed her dubiously as he held open the door. "You all right, lady?"

She didn't answer for a moment, being occupied with watching a handful of noisy East-Side urchins go hurtling past on rollerskates, most of them already decked out six weeks or so in advance of the calendar in Hallowe'en costumes, masks, and all the other trappings of the old blackmail game of *trick-or-treat*.

"Because it's a new hack, lady, and I own it," the driver went on, drawing certain erroneous inferences from the fact that she happened to be standing in front of a saloon. "You're not going to be sick or anything?"

Miss Withers turned on him a countenance which was, for her, almost radiant. "No, I'm not going to be sick," she told the man. "But between you and me and the lamppost, I know somebody else who is—and it serves him perfectly right!"

He pushed down the flag with unnecessary firmness, and the meter started clicking. But still Miss Withers lingered. "Driver," she said as she finally climbed inside, "have you ever been hemmed in with the spears and then all of a sudden out of nowhere comes a patch of blue sky?"

“Look, lady. I should listen to your sad story? Maybe you’re from out of town. Maybe you seen movies and read articles about how all New York cab-drivers are characters, full of philosophy and whimsy and stuff. We ain’t. Maybe bartenders got to listen, but we don’t. You tell me where you want to go, I take you there, you pay me what it says on the meter—*finis!*”

He let out the gears, roared the motor, and the cab leaped ahead like a greyhound out of the starting box, jamming Miss Withers’ incredible hat down over her eyes. But even that cavalier treatment could not, at this moment, dampen her spirits. She started to give her own address, then changed her mind and said, “Driver, just what sort of place is the Duke Hotel?”

Turning a jaundiced eye, he said, “You wanta know? It’s a flea-bag, a meat and potatoes joint half a block off Times Square, full of bookies and rum-hounds and floozies and actors. Better you should go to the Martha Washington.”

“I think,” Miss Withers said firmly, “I’ll first try the Duke, just for size.”

“Here is another bead on the string of confusions.”  
—*William E. Woodward*

## 7.

IT WAS A NARROW, TORMENTED little hotel, squeezed tight between a dark legitimate theater and an office building with a bar on the ground floor. The façade was vaguely classic; it must have had certain pretensions once, but that would have been when Miss Withers was in pigtails: Perhaps the great gilt mirrors in the lobby had reflected the glitter of Diamond Jim Brady and the flaming Titian of Lillian Russell’s hair, but now they showed even to the inquisitive schoolteacher a wavering and distorted parody of herself. The peeling leather chairs scattered between marble pillars were all empty, and uncomfortable enough looking to explain the fact. A hundred ancient odors, too mixed for any identification, pervaded the place.

The man behind the desk had little shiny dark eyes and rodent’s teeth, giving the impression that he had seen everything years ago and didn’t much like it. Looking Miss Withers up and down, he said a noncommittal “Yeyuss?”

“You have a Mr. Sprott registered here?” she opened bluntly.

Beady eyes turned briefly toward the slot marked 14B, which held a key fastened to a brass marker the size of a playing card. “They’re out to dinner, I guess. Any message?”

“No—” She hesitated a moment. “Yes, I believe there is.” Miss Withers reached into her handbag, and then placed a crisp five-dollar bill on the counter. “Shall we say it’s a message for you, young man? My inquiry isn’t official, and it probably won’t go any further. But was Mr. Sprott at home last evening?”

“Lady, *I* wouldn’t know.”

“Would you know for *ten* dollars? It’s just—just the matter of establishing possible witnesses to an accident.” After all, she temporized with her conscience, murder was a sort of accident, and a murderer was certainly a witness to his deed.

The man shook his head. “Oh,” continued the schoolteacher swiftly, “I know Mr. Sprott and his orchestra are playing at The Grotto. But between

the dinner show and the midnight show there's a couple of hours or more unaccounted for—"

He reluctantly refrained from picking up the money. "Lady, I'm trying to tell you. I wouldn't know. I'm only on days. Come back after six o'clock and ask the night clerk."

"Oh," she said. "You may keep the money, perhaps it will help you to forget that I was here."

"KO," he said, and the five did a disappearing act. Miss Withers marched out into the street again. But half an hour later she was back, carrying a second-hand suitcase loaded with convincingly heavy oddments, a prominently displayed copy of *Billboard* and *Variety*, and, of course, her handbag and black cotton umbrella, which added up to quite a burden. The night man was a slightly more recent edition of the other, except that he had a bad cold and smelled of gin.

"Room and bath, please," announced the schoolteacher. "Professional rate."

His look added new force to the meaning of the word *askance*. "Professional how?"

Miss Withers, who had just written "Martha Vere de Vere" on the register slip, held the theatrical magazines so he could get a good look at the covers, and said haughtily, "I'm Aunt Abbie on the Sunshine Soap hour. Don't you ever listen to the radio?" And as he hesitated, looking at her dubiously, she added, "I've just been auditioning for a TV program, that's why I'm still in costume."

"Okay," the clerk said. "Most of our people are permanent, but maybe—" He looked at the slots, and chose a key. "I've got just one, with shower, three dollars. In advance."

"I suppose that will have to do until you can move me to something better," she said, and laid her umbrella down on the desk while she fumbled in her handbag. Then somehow her change purse slipped out of her fingers, spilling silver in a little cascade across the desk and down into the dark recesses behind it. "Oops!" she cried. "How *could* I be so clumsy!"

The man hesitated, and then with a heartfelt sigh bent down and began to pick up the money. He was red-faced and out of breath when he finally reappeared to plunk a handful of coins down on the counter with what seemed unnecessary firmness, only grunting at Miss Withers' profuse

thanks. She paid him three dollar bills for the room, and then was somewhat surprised to see him come out of his cubbyhole and pick up her bag.

“Bellhops both out somewhere,” he said over his shoulder. “This way, Aunt Abbie.” They rose haltingly skyward in an elevator that really should have gone to the Smithsonian as a relic of Mr. Otis’ first efforts, and she was taken down a dimly lighted hall and let into a small room smelling of stale cigarettes, mildew, and human feet. Miss Withers gave the man a quarter to go away, and when he looked at it pointedly she almost reminded him that the change he had retrieved from the floor was seventy-five cents short.

At last alone, she was about to sit down on the bed and plan future operations when she took a second look at the coverlet and decided it would be more restful to stand up. But at least she was inside the hotel. And clutched in her hand was Riff Sprott’s key, which she had deftly hooked with the tip of her umbrella while the clerk was down on his hands and knees. She was now on the fifteenth floor, which meant that she had only one flight of stairs to descend.

Only it was a bad hour for prowling. People would be coming home from work, or going out to dinner. And most of the guests were permanent, the clerk had said. That meant that a stranger would stand out like a sore thumb.

But a quick look told her that the hall was empty, and she whisked out and down the stairs like a ghost. In the middle of the lower hallway she was caught flat-footed by the sudden opening of the elevator door. A young man and a not-so-young woman came mirthfully and unsteadily toward her, carrying clinking packages and evidently well on their way toward tomorrow’s hangover. Miss Withers resisted the tendency to scuttle back toward the stair or to hide her face, and gave them a critically disapproving stare, with the result that they quieted down and hurried on past with what seemed a distinctly sheepish air.

An attack was the best defense, she reminded herself, and marched on toward the door of 14B. Entering, she quickly closed it behind her and switched on the lights. She found herself in the living room of a suite that was furnished and decorated in a surprisingly pleasant manner, with a new carpet, chairs covered in rose and green slips, and bright pillows on the divan. There was a large radio-phonograph-television set, a spinet piano,

two vases of asters and zinnias on the mantel and a lot of late, frothy magazines and even a few books, not all of the latter dealing with music.

Miss Withers went on into the bedroom, put down her handbag and umbrella, and made a quick survey. Someone had bathed and changed recently—the bath was soggy and steamy, and a mist of powder floated in the air, mingled with some heavy perfume. The bedspread was rumpled, with an open, almost full box of chocolates and a magazine or two nearly crowding the phone off the bedside table. Not much of a housekeeper, the singer Riff Sprott had married on the rebound. But she took excellent care of her belongings. Dozens of pairs of shoes hung in pockets on the inside of the closet door. On hangers were rows of evening dresses, most of which the schoolteacher thought would be apt to give the wearer a bad chest cold. These, in addition to some slacks and sweaters and a few negligees, were evidently about all that Chloris ever wore.

Bits of trumpery jewelry, earrings and the like, were scattered over the top of the dressing table. But no sign of any necklace—that would have been almost too much to expect.

Miss Withers was not at all sure what she was looking for, but she had an idea that she would know it when she found it. It was her pet theory that while almost anybody might under the right circumstances commit a murder, he then suffered a change that set him apart from the rest of the human race. The dark secret locked in the recesses of his heart must subtly poison everything about him from that time forward. He would never react exactly the same as a non-murderer under any stimulus. He would be overalert and suspicious, defending himself from attacks that were only imaginary, fleeing when no man pursued.

And a man's home, like his handwriting, reflected his personality. If Riff Sprott had killed a girl a year ago last August, if he had killed again last night out of an unreasoning, superstitious fear that a professional medium would disclose his secret, then there should be traces, signs, tracks in the snow here, if anywhere.

She searched the living room meticulously, though not quite as the police would have done. The law looked for concrete clues, for hidden documents or jewels or concealed weapons. But the schoolteacher was trying to delve one layer deeper, convinced that every action must have its reaction—and leave its traces.



Miss Withers brightened when on a shelf in the living room closet she came upon an old manila envelope containing part of a song-poem set to scribbled music, the sheets torn twice across but mended with scotch tape. The title was “Tall and Terrific” but that had been scratched out and changed to “Witchingest Gal.” There was no dedication, though after she had sung the words to the haunting, incomplete melody she felt that it needed none.

“I get a kick out of coffee, I get a charge out of tea,  
Liquor is quicker but even hard liquor  
Don’t do what you do to me ...  
I like the babes at The Horseshoe, I like the dolls at the Stork,  
I saw South Pacific, but Tall and Terrific,  
You’re the witchingest gal in New York ...”

“Such grammar!” said Miss Withers. “I’ll stick with Victor Herbert.” But the song must have been written for Midge Harrington, and would a man keep a memento like that around if he had strangled the girl?

She next came upon a sheaf of old bank statements—the Sprotts’ balance wobbled usually at less than \$300. A year ago it had got down to \$8.85, but the latest statement, for September first, was just under a thousand. There was a rather large check made out to the American Federation of Musicians for back dues, dated last March, and since then Riff had kept himself paid up and in good standing.

The schoolteacher stretched exploring fingers behind the cushions of the easy chairs, finding a few coins, a pocketknife with a broken blade, packets of paper matches, hairpins of three or four differing shades, and an open safety pin that stabbed her mercilessly. In a table drawer she pounced hopefully on a worn leather address book, but it contained no entry for Marika, none for Midge Harrington.

No sign of any weapon anywhere. Nothing to tie Sprott to Marika, not even a trenchcoat—and the only hat anywhere in sight was a dusty opera topper, size 6 ½—which was still close enough in circumference to the one that she had found under Marika’s body. She regretted with all her heart that the place didn’t have a kitchen. Miss Withers felt that she could tell more about a family from ten minutes in its kitchen than from tapping its telephones or reading its diaries. As a last resort she tried the bathroom, but

found nothing unusual there except evidence that somebody in the household had recently acquired numerous patent remedies for gastritis.

There were those, she realized, who would call this unforgivable snooping. But the end justified the means, she hoped.

She at once proceeded with Plan B, spending ten minutes or so in making it clear that the apartment had been searched with a heavy hand—and yet not too clear, and not too heavy. She turned over Chloris' underwear in the bureau drawers, probed into the facial creams with a nail file, moved furniture slightly out of place, and as a last artistic touch produced a cigar butt from the wrapping of tissue where she had carried it since she picked it up on the sidewalk, and placed it ostentatiously on the edge of the mirrored vanity. Riff Sprott, she knew, smoked cigarettes. This ought to give him something to think about.

Keep jabbing, keep 'em off balance, as they said at the prize fights.

It was well after seven o'clock. Riff Sprott and his orchestra would be on in the basement of The Grotto Club now, with Chloris probably leaning on the piano and rendering one of the torchy, slightly risqué ballads whose sheet music was on top of the spinet. Miss Withers wondered if on her way back uptown she ought not to stop in and catch their act.

She had just gathered up her handbag and umbrella and switched off the bedroom light when she heard masculine voices in the hall and then the rattle of the knob—the door was opening, and she realized that with criminal negligence she had forgotten to lock it again from the inside!

Now she was trapped! Miss Withers pressed herself against the wall behind the bedroom door, her heart pounding so she could hardly hear the voices in the other room.

“Chloris honey?” That was Riff Sprott's inquiring tenor. He came almost to the bedroom door, then stopped. “Chloris, you home?”

“Nobody here but jus' us chickens, boss,” said Miss Withers silently.

“That wife of mine,” Sprott said. “She must have forgotten something and had to rush back for it. Typical of her to leave the lights on and the door unlocked.”

“Women,” said the other man, in a voice that the schoolteacher almost recognized.

“... never know who's listening in a bar, you know. That's why I suggested we come up here. Care for a drink?”

Then Miss Withers began to shiver, remembering that the only liquor in the place was in the two bottles on the closet shelf. But the second man said not right after dinner, thanks. There was the sound of a chair being moved across the floor, and the voices were pitched confidentially lower. “So what are we going to do about it?”

“I wish to hell I knew,” Sprott said feelingly.

“Stick it out until Monday?”

“What else? We can’t go to the police and demand a showdown—”

“No, no. That would be asking for trouble.”

“I’ve got it,” Sprott said, “without asking. Police on my tail day and night.”

“I know. There’s a little man in a hard hat who’s been standing across the street and watching my windows. Suppose my pupils get wise to that, huh?” Miss Withers stifled a gasp. This was—it must be!—Nils Bruner!

“You know who we have to thank for this stink, don’t you?” Sprott said bitterly.

“Sure. Rowan’s wife is spending money. She’s hired that Whoops Sister in the funny hat to try to pin it on somebody, anybody. And she’s got the cops stirred up like a nest of hornets.”

“This job last night—it makes it bad all around. Of course you’ve got an ilibi?”

“Of course,” said Nils Bruner. “Only she’s a little under age.” There was a moment of strained silence, and then somebody turned on the radio—tuned softly, but just enough so there was no more chance of overhearing anything.

Miss Withers had to get out of here, and fast. But there was no fire escape at the window, no convenient balcony. Just a straight drop of fourteen storeys to the street. There was light enough from the electric signs across the way so that she could make out the shape of objects in the darkness, and noise enough from the living room to cover her movements.

She stripped the pillowcases from the bed, and cautiously ripped them apart. One she tied around her head, loosening a few strands of hair so that it fell in untidy wisps across her forehead. The other pillowcase made an apron, of sorts. Her handbag and coat, folded inside a spare blanket from the bed and a towel from the bathroom, made a convincing bundle of linen

...

Only her hat and umbrella remained, both impossible to camouflage. She said an affectionate farewell to the bonnet, then sent it sailing off into space. It was one of her favorites, though the Inspector always said it looked as if it had been taken away from its mother too young. She would have sent the umbrella after it, but there were passers-by down in the street and she feared impaling somebody. As a last resort she tucked it away in the closet out of sight.

Now everything was as ready as it would ever be. No—there would have to be something to explain the time lapse. She splashed water around in the bathroom, then closed the door firmly, picked up the bundle, and marched out into the living room.

Remembering Chesterton's invisible postman, she was banking on the fact that chambermaids are never noticed around a hotel. Her shoulders were bowed, her feet moved in the weary shuffle of the downtrodden, and she held the bundle well up in front of her face. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the two men, their heads together beside the radio, start up like frightened fawns.

"Evenin', Mister Sprott," she muttered in a tired singsong. "Ay yoost bring you some clean towel and turn down the bed ..."

"Hey!" he said. "What the—"

"Ay know it's late," she said over her shoulder as she grasped the doorknob. "But Ay couldn't get in when the police were here ..."

And then somehow she was hurrying down the hall. Perhaps somebody opened the door again to stare after her, but she did not turn to make sure. Ahead of her a bellboy was lugging up an armful of baggage, with a starved blonde in his wake, but the schoolteacher maintained her steady shuffle and he passed by without a glance.

"I ought to have been an actress!" Miss Withers told herself as she found the temporary security of the waiting elevator. She pressed the emergency stop between floors, giving herself time enough to remove the remains of the pillowcases, resume her coat and bag, and get her hair back into some approximation of order. Then she pressed her thumb on the second-floor button and held it there all the way down.

She came timorously down the last flight of stairs—and then found that she need not run the gauntlet of the lobby after all. At the foot of the stairs, behind the elevator well, was a side entrance leading into the cocktail lounge next door. The schoolteacher marched through the place with her

nose in the air, and came out into the street just in time to see a cruising taxi pass over her jettisoned hat, reducing it to a non-flying saucer.

But the driver heard her anguished cry and slowed down, so she pretended she had only been trying to hail him anyway. A moment later, battered but reasonably intact, Miss Withers was around the corner and heading northward across Times Square.

The meter ticked steadily, and she closed her eyes, thinking of it as another sort of clock, a shining hourglass through which the sands of Andrew Rowan's life were running out. While the police wasted their time searching for a chimera that was supposed to have killed Marika, and she herself frittered away her time like a child at the seashore gathering shells and shiny pebbles that only turned out to be drab, colorless stones when she got them home.

And she had nothing to tell Natalie, at least nothing encouraging. "Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof," said Miss Withers to herself. "Perhaps if I slept on it—"

She came hastily up her stairs, thinking of cinnamon toast and tea, a soaking hot bath and then bed, but as she let herself into the apartment and turned on the light she cried an unbelieving "Oh, *no!*"

During the long afternoon, driven no doubt by extremes of boredom, Talleyrand had chewed up the entire New York *Times*, leaving a passably good imitation of papier-mâché all over the living room rug. But the big poodle greeted his mistress with such paroxysms of delight that she hardly had the heart to scold.

"Which comes first, walk or dinner?" she asked the dog.

Talley voted emphatically for walk, and presented her with his lead. They were coming down the stairs together when they ran head-on into a little man who turned out, of all people, to be George Zotos. The pastry king, it developed, had been tramping up and down the street for an hour, waiting for her to come home.

"If you want to talk to me now," she apologized somewhat breathlessly, "I'm afraid you'll have to tramp some more."

It was indeed the sketchiest of interviews. Talley, in spite of his choke collar, yanked the schoolteacher from tree to hydrant at a pace that made poor Zotos hop, skip and jump to keep up.

"Something you ought to know ..." the man managed to say. "If you're still working on the case of poor Midge Harrington, that is."

“There are a great many things I ought to know, and very few that I do. Please go on.”

“It’s only that—well, when you came to see me so unexpectedly the other day I was so shocked and upset—” Here Talleyrand came upon a gaunt alley cat prowling the gutter, and made the night hideous with challenges, very nearly getting his nose laid open for his pains.

“Shut up!” commanded Miss Withers. “No, not *you*, Mr. Zotos. Do go on.”

“Remember you asked me that day what it was that went wrong with Midge’s hopes of becoming Miss Brooklyn and then possibly working up to a try for Miss America?”

“Of course.” The schoolteacher pried Talley off a trodden lump of chewing gum.

“I got to thinking, after you left. Midge was—well, she was a wonderful girl. If the police have the wrong man in prison, and her real murderer is walking the street and laughing up his sleeve, then something must be done.”

“Obviously.” They swung around a corner, past the open door of a drugstore where Talley had once been treated to an ice cream cone. Once past this hurdle, which took both threats and brute force, the big dog settled down to a more resigned pace.

“I want to help, in any way I can,” continued Zotos. “So I thought it over and then I went to one of the men who was on the local committee at the time, and made a few discreet inquiries. I found out that somebody had written them a letter, pointing out that Midge was ineligible for Atlantic City. They have some very strict rules for the girls, you know. The contestants must be Caucasians—”

“Immediately eliminating the lovely girls from Harlem and Chinatown? What a *pity* that Miss America can’t come out of the melting pot. But was Midge—?”

“Oh, no. It was something else. The next rule is that the contestants can’t be under contract to anybody, like a movie studio or a model agency or anything like that. Midge had a screen test at Paramount, but nothing ever came of it. So it wasn’t that either.”

“I see,” said the schoolteacher impatiently. “You’re trying to say that it was her purple past, then, just as Mrs. Rowan hinted to me. The old idea of the tribal virgin, the *tapu*. Read your *Golden Bough*.”

Mr. Zotos seemed a little embarrassed. “Well, ma’am—you see, one of the most important rules of all is that the contestant can’t ever have been married.”

Miss Withers stood stock-still, almost making Talleyrand do a somersault. “*Married?* You don’t mean that the Harrington girl—?”

“Yes, ma’am. The letter gave proof.”

“But for heaven’s sake, *when?* I thought her time was fairly well accounted for, from the first nebulous romance with her dancing teacher until the disaster with Andy Rowan.”

“Oh, it was *before* she took dancing lessons from Bruner.” He almost spat the name.

“At *fifteen?*”

He bowed his head. “Midge was a big girl for her age, and very mature. She always passed for two or three years older than she was. I couldn’t find out the man’s name—my informant said the letter had been lost in the files. But he thought he remembered that there was a photostat enclosed, probably of the marriage registration. That was all I was able to get out of him—he’s a fellow named Klotz, owns the Loveland Ballroom.”

The schoolteacher thought about that until they had rounded the park corner, homeward bound. “But how odd that the police didn’t dig that all out, after the girl was murdered!”

“The police seem to have missed a good many pertinent details,” Zotos said. “But they thought the case closed, I guess, when they arrested Rowan. Why, they barely asked *me* any questions.” He seemed a little hurt at that.

“But they established your alibi for the night Midge was killed, didn’t they?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, of course.”

“Which was—?”

“I went to a play that night. *Life with Father*. I showed them my seat stub.”

“Oh, yes. I saw it too. All those red-headed children! And that hilarious scene in the second act when Father has his portrait painted—”

“Portrait?” Zotos looked puzzled. “I don’t remember ... they must have cut that out the night I saw it.”

Miss Withers hadn’t really expected him to bite on that one. “How lucky that you kept your seat stub.” She walked on in silence for a few moments. “Were you at the theater last night, too?”

“Last night? Oh, no. Just a quiet evening at home with my books. I collect first editions, you know. Of cookbooks. A dealer in Boston just found me a perfect *Cook’s Guide and Butler’s Assistant*, 1868. Francatelli, you know ...”

“I think I have an early *Fanny Farmer* around my apartment,” the schoolteacher said absently. She walked on in silence for a few moments. “So now reenters the ghost lover,” she murmured. “White orchids on the day after Easter. Of course, it all fits like a glove. ‘The first time a woman loves her lover ...’ ♪ They were approaching her steps again, having circled the block. “Won’t you come up for a cup of tea or something?” she said hesitantly.

But Zotos was panting a little. “I’m afraid I don’t feel up to climbing any stairs right now,” he admitted. “Anyway, I’ve said all I have to say. I just thought this was something you ought to know.”

“I see. Why?”

An odd glint came into the little pastry manufacturer’s eye. He still resembled a spaniel, but now it was a spaniel who had glimpsed another, larger dog digging up one of his own buried bones. “You never saw Midge Harrington,” he said. “From her pictures you can’t really get an idea of what there was about her that made her so different from any other healthy, well-proportioned young woman. But she had a sort of magic. No man who ever knew her could forget her. Not Bruner, though as I’ve discovered he tries—with the help of his more precocious pupils. Not the musician, though he married somebody else. But what about this first man who married Midge and then lost her? Suppose he never got over being in love with her? Suppose he lay awake night after night brooding about it, suppose he read the newspaper gossip columns every day to see if Winchell or Sobol or Sullivan mentioned that she was supposed to be ‘that way’ about some new flame, or that some swing trumpet-player had tried to kill himself over her. Suppose he finally cracked wide-open, and love turned to hate—?”

“They are only opposite sides of the same coin, as somebody once said.”

“Exactly. He might have said to himself that if he couldn’t have her, then nobody could!”

“A very interesting hypothesis,” Miss Withers told him. “You’re quite a psychologist, Mr. Zotos. One can see that you’ve been giving this a good deal of thought.”



"I've been lying awake nights—" he began, and then stopped. It was evident that Zotos, having shot his bolt, considered the interview over. He edged away. "You'll call me, of course, if there's anything else I can do?"

"Naturally. But one point occurs to me at the moment. When the committee got this anonymous letter, why didn't they—"

"But it wasn't!" he interrupted. "It was signed *Virla Bruner*!"

The Withers eyebrows went up. "Well! How extremely interesting." She nodded. "I'm very grateful for this information. So will be Mrs. Rowan when I tell her—and Andy too, if it helps save his neck."

Zotos smiled a smile that was almost a snarl, licking his soft pinkish lips. "Don't misunderstand me, ma'am. I don't shed any tears over Rowan. He deserves everything he gets for what he did to Midge, even if he didn't actually kill her. But if it *was* somebody else, and I can help in any way to send *him* where he belongs—"

"What a bloodthirsty little man it is!" observed Miss Withers thoughtfully a few moments later, as she presented Talleyrand with his long overdue dinner. "He'd actually like to see everyone boiled in oil who ever touched the hem of Midge Harrington's garment, and then go dance a jig on their graves."

Talley wagged his stub of a tail furiously, but went on with the serious business at hand. He was very fond of his mistress, but sometimes he thought she talked a good deal, an attitude shared by most of her friends and associates.

"But if Mr. Zotos' information is correct, and it has the ring of truth about it, then the bottom falls out of the police case against Andy Rowan! The Harrington girl could hardly have been after him to get a divorce and marry her if she was already married herself."

Talley banged his dish around the linoleum, hinting at seconds. But Miss Withers, who had already begun to dial a number on the telephone, had changed her mind again and was putting on her coat. "Good news," she said, "is something that should be delivered in person."

“There are masked words abroad, I say, which nobody understands ...”  
—*John Ruskin*

## 8.

THERE WAS A MULTITUDE of things that Natalie Rowan ought to be doing. Yet here she sat in her living room, helplessly listening to a man from the insurance company. He had a soft voice and a sympathetic smile; he was red-faced and gray-haired and reminded her a little of her own dead father, but his eyes looked like cold boiled onions. She already had a headache, and wished with all her heart that he would finish and go away.

But there he sat, like Patience on a monument, glued to her sofa. “Really, Mr. Brownell, I’ll have to think it over,” she said uncertainly.

“Except, my dear lady, you forget the time element?” His cough was delicate.

“I know.” Her eyes clouded. “The week of the twentieth.”

“Precisely.” Mr. Brownell referred to a sheaf of papers. “Your husband Andrew Bryce Rowan has had a straight life policy, face value \$20,000, with our company since 1939. It is still in force, because you yourself have been making the quarterly payments during the past year ...”

“But naturally. Why wouldn’t I? I’m the beneficiary.”

“That is correct. Now the cash surrender value of the policy, as of today, is a little over \$8500. If the insured wished, he could borrow that amount against it. Now, Mrs. Rowan, business is business. Ours is a small mutual company, and I admit that we are not anxious to assume any avoidable losses. It has occurred to our board of directors that perhaps in your present predicament you might be in need of immediate funds for the purpose of preparing an appeal, arranging petitions for clemency, or whatever. Therefore I am empowered to offer you, as beneficiary, a flat settlement of three-fourths the face value, or \$15,000.” Mr. Brownell removed a signed, color-perforated check from his outsized wallet, and studied it complacently. “Do you have your husband’s policy here at hand?”

“Why yes, but I still don’t see—” quavered Natalie. “Why should I accept \$15,000 today when perhaps next week—?” She shuddered. “This is horrible.”

“Think of your own best interests, Mrs. Rowan,” said the insurance man calmly. “I’ll explain it again. We are gambling—I should say we are taking a planned risk. If we settle the claim in advance, there is always the possibility of a reprieve, or a commutation of sentence to life imprisonment. If you do not accept settlement, your husband may live out his life expectancy in prison with you having to keep up the payments all those years ...”

Then the doorbell rang.

“It’s only more reporters,” sighed Natalie. “I have no more privacy than a goldfinch. I won’t answer it, I never do when I’m alone unless somebody has called first to make an appointment the way you did.”

But the doorbell kept ringing, as insistent as a yapping terrier.

“They’ll get tired and go away,” said Natalie hopefully. But whoever it was didn’t get tired, and didn’t go away. Finally she excused herself, tiptoeing into the dining room to open a tiny crack in the drawn Venetian blind.

“Miss Withers!” she cried, and ran to fling open the front door. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here! Iris has let me down, she hasn’t been here all day. But there’s a man from the insurance company about Andy’s policy, and he wants me to sign something.”

“Read the fine print first,” advised the schoolteacher. In the living room she listened to it all, her eyebrows going higher and higher.

“Now, Miss Withers,” the man continued affably, “as a friend of Mrs. Rowan you will see the obvious values in her accepting our offer of settlement. She is immediately assured of three-fourths the face value of the policy.”

“Just a minute,” interrupted the schoolteacher. “Mr. Brownell, just what position do you hold with the insurance company?”

“Why, I’m a trouble-shooter, sort of an investigator. Our company covers all types of policies—fire and theft, accident, personal liability and so on. Now and then something comes up—”

“It does indeed. And you want to save the company \$5000, is that it?”

“Why yes, in a way. As I told Mrs. Rowan, we are running the risk of a reprieve or commutation, which would mean that we had settled the claim prematurely. Of course, the life expectancy of a man in prison is considerably less than the averages that appear on actuarial tables. It seemed to us a fair deal all around—Mrs. Rowan has immediate tax-free

funds to finance last-minute attempts to save her husband, and the company —”

“The company my sainted aunt!” Miss Withers sniffed a stupendous sniff, and her keen blue-gray eyes fixed Mr. Brownell as if he were some large strange bug on a pin. “Is it your regular policy to offer this sort of settlement in such cases?”

“As I said before, ours is a small mutual company. None of our policyholders has ever been executed for murder until now.” He looked rather uncomfortable.

“Nobody’s executed until it happens,” the schoolteacher pointed out crisply. “And this hasn’t happened and isn’t going to.”

Natalie looked noticeably brighter at the firm reassurance. But Mr. Brownell shook his head. “I have talked to the police, and I hear that the Governor has let it be known that he does not plan—”

“Governors can change their minds, and policemen too.” The schoolteacher turned. “Mrs. Rowan, are you asking my advice about this?”

“Why, yes. But I wasn’t going to sign!” Natalie said hastily. “I don’t really need the money.”

Brownell’s face took on a blank expression. It was evident that never in his life had he come into contact with anybody who didn’t need money, and admitted it. “In that case—” he said stiffly, and rose to go.

“Just a minute,” put in Miss Withers. “I’m beginning to see what this is all about. May I ask you, sir, what started this whole thing?”

He hesitated, and then smiled—all but the boiled-onion eyes. “I don’t quite understand.”

“What inspired this desperate attempt to get Mrs. Rowan to accept a settlement? You haven’t *heard* anything, have you?” She nodded. “I can see that you have.”

“It was only the letter,” admitted Mr. Brownell, somewhat nettled. “The letter from Rowan, asking to change the beneficiary of his policy. But of course we can’t do that without Mrs. Rowan’s permission; clause 17 of our policy states very clearly that there can be no change of beneficiary when said beneficiary has made payments on behalf of the insured, as Mrs. Rowan has been doing.”

“This gets clearer and clearer,” said the schoolteacher, with a sidewise glance at Natalie. “I won’t waste time asking who it was that Rowan wanted as his new beneficiary, because I can guess. He probably also made a

formal request that the recipient utilize the money to clear his name of the stigma of murder, even though it would have to be done posthumously.”

“Why, er—I believe there was something of the sort, yes.”

“I knew it! Mrs. Rowan, you’re very wise not to accept that check!”

The insurance man didn’t say anything. He was very silent, and it was one of the most profane silences that Miss Withers had ever heard.

“But go ahead,” said the schoolteacher to Natalie, “and give your permission to have the beneficiary changed as your husband requests. Because if anything in the world could build a fire under Inspector Oscar Piper, that would. When he learns that in addition to being Andy’s heir he is *also* beneficiary of his insurance—”

“One moment, madam,” interrupted the insurance man. “You seem to be laboring under a certain misapprehension. Andrew Rowan in his letter did not mention the name of any Inspector Piper at all.”

“He didn’t? Then who on earth—?”

“*You*, madam!” said Mr. Brownell coldly, and for once had the last word.

When he was gone the two women stared at each other. “Wouldn’t you like a drink or something?” Natalie asked finally.

“Tea,” said Miss Withers. “Double strength.”

“It’s only that Andy’s heard what you’re trying to do in his behalf,” her hostess said a few minutes later. “And if you don’t succeed in saving him, he still wants you to continue the job after he’s gone.”

“The poor man can’t have much confidence, if all he hopes for is posthumous vindication. Is he really so resigned to his fate, then?”

“Not Andy,” said Natalie Rowan proudly. “He was quite cheerful when I saw him. And I was talking with that Mr. Huff last week, who works up at the prison, and he said Andy was taking it unusually well.”

Miss Withers stirred her tea. “Huff? Oh yes, the keeper who threw me out.”

“But he was only trying to protect Andy from what he thought was a newspaper reporter. Mr. Huff thinks Andy is really innocent, he as much as told me so.”

“Indeed? And why?”

“Mr. Huff said that other men in the condemned row give their personal possessions when it gets toward the time; a musical instrument promised to one man, books and trinkets to another, and so on. But Andy

hasn't given anything away—" Natalie stopped suddenly and crossed her fingers. "Heaven grant that he doesn't have to."

"Amen to that," agreed the schoolteacher. "But what I came up to tell you—"

"Is it the police?" Natalie interrupted hopefully. "Have they found anything? Are they beginning to realize that the same person killed both those girls?"

"No," admitted Miss Withers flatly. "The Inspector has a new theory, a little on the fantastic side—"

"He doesn't suspect *me*, does he? Because I don't have any alibi for that night except going to the movies, and everybody knows I'd do almost anything in the world to save Andy now that I know he's innocent ..."

"Innocent people usually don't have very good alibis, if any." Miss Withers was a little amused. "And if you had gone to such desperate lengths as committing murder to help your husband, you wouldn't have used a crystal ball as a weapon."

"It should have been a necklace," agreed Natalie. "If only the murderer had used the same weapon this time, so even the police could *see* the connection—"

"The police! Inspector Piper has leaped on a horse and galloped off in all the wrong directions. His current theory—" And she told about Banana-Nose Wilson.

The woman slumped in her chair, for once looking her age. "Sometimes it all seems so hopeless," she moaned. "You don't know what a day I've had. People hammering on the door, and no little Iris to shoo them away. First there was the man from Campbell's mortuary who wanted to talk to me about arrangements for bringing—for bringing Andy's body back, and whether there'd be a funeral or what." She dabbed at her eyes with a bit of lace. "I told him that if there was any funeral there'd be a double one, and I mean it. Then a nasty young man from some true official detective magazine wanted to take a picture of this living room as the scene of the murder, to illustrate some story he's written that's to run in the magazine as soon as Andy is officially executed, and then—"

"However difficult your day, I imagine it had nothing on your husband's," cut in Miss Withers tartly. "But cheer up, I have good news, or what may turn out to be so. I've been stirring up our suspects a bit." She

gave a brief account of her prowling at the Duke Hotel, and of how Mr. Zotos had popped up with a new lead.

“The Harrington girl *married?*” gasped Natalie.

“Making four suspects instead of three, if we can only locate him. On top of that, I think I know how the murderer of Midge Harrington managed to get into the apartment house to murder Marika, and—”

The doorbell rang again. “I should have a maid,” Natalie admitted. “But I can’t stand anybody bustling around. If Iris were only here—”

“I’m afraid that Iris Dunn has stood not upon the order of her going, but gone. Carried away in an expensive imported chariot by a weedy knight known as Bill. But I’ll promise you that I’ll locate her when and if we need her. Meanwhile, suppose I see what I can do in the role of Cerberus.” She marched out to the front door, and opened it.

“Stop leaning on that bell!” she said firmly. “Mrs. Rowan isn’t—” Then she stopped. Standing out on the step, resplendent in silver fox, was an extremely beautiful, though plumpish red-head; a tall proud girl who managed to look angry, scared, and appealing all at the same time.

“I’m Chloris Klee,” she said quickly. “May I please come in? It’s important.”

“Why, you’re Mrs. Riff Sprott, I remember!”

“Mrs. *Walden* Sprott,” corrected the girl. “Riff is just a sort of nickname. Only I use my professional name, mostly.” She came into the house, obviously stiffening her spine for the ordeal. “I remember you too,” said Chloris. “You’re the one who tried to make with the jive talk, and then tipped Riff off that the heat was on. Only I didn’t expect you’d be here.”

“You want to see Mrs. Rowan—on behalf of your husband, I suppose? Why did he send you?”

“But he didn’t! He mustn’t ever know!” whispered the girl as she followed Miss Withers into the living room. Natalie Rowan, who had prudently retreated into the rear of the house, came back into the room and was introduced.

But Chloris refused a cup of tea, a drink, and even a chair. “What I’ve got to say won’t take a minute, and I have a show to do. I came up here, Mrs. Rowan, to beg you to use your influence to make the police let my husband alone.”

“Oh?” said Natalie blankly. “*My* influence?”

“He’s almost out of his mind with this persecution! His lip is gone, his timing is way off, and tonight he even had to get a substitute to play his horn. The management of The Grotto is about ready to tear up the contract and throw us all out into the street. Can you imagine what it’s like to have detectives following you everywhere you go, peering in through the door when you stop in a cafeteria for a bite, standing outside your hotel all night and looking up at the window?”

Natalie Rowan slowly shook her head.

“Riff can’t eat, he can’t sleep, he can’t even drink! Look, Mrs. Rowan, I know you’re behind all this—reopening the Harrington case and all the rest of it. You’ve got money, and you’re needling the police. You’re doing it for your man—you love him a lot, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said the woman softly. “If he dies, I die too. That sounds fancy, but it’s the truth.”

“Then maybe you know how I’ve felt about Riff since the first day I met him, and that was almost three years ago! Maybe your husband didn’t kill that big Harrington witch, and if he did for my money he ought to get a medal.” Chloris shrugged her well-rounded shoulders. “But even if he didn’t kill her—get this! My husband didn’t either!”

“One moment—” put in Miss Withers.

“Oh, I suppose the police have found out about the alibi!” Chloris smiled scornfully. “I suppose they finally worked on one of the boys in the band and got him to break down and admit that Riff didn’t spend the evening of the murder with them at a jam session up in Harlem like they swore they did. Swing musicians always stick together; they have no special love for the law, and the boys thought they were doing Riff a favor by saying he was along. Only he wasn’t—I can see you already know that. But there’s one thing you don’t know—”

“Several things, but we’re finding out fast,” said Miss Withers under her breath.

“Riff was home in our hotel suite that night!” the girl concluded defiantly. “I know it.”

“And just how do you know it?”

“Okay, I’ll give it to you straight, since it’s just among us girls. The combo didn’t have any bookings that week, all of August was *lousay* that summer. We were strictly from hunger, and things got so bad that I went back to doing dinners.”



“You, a cook?” The schoolteacher’s eyebrows went up again.

“Judas, no! I mean stag dinners. It’s a quick hundred bucks.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t understand,” admitted Miss Withers.

“I know!” offered Natalie. “She means she was baked into pies, and took baths in wine, that sort of thing. I remember one night in Paree—”

Chloris laughed out loud. “That’s specialty stuff, they hire burleyque talent for that. No, all I ever did was to wear a slinky off-the-shoulder evening gown and circulate. It’s not so rough, you don’t have to get in very deep if you remember to keep smiling and sidestepping. You make dates with any of the suckers who insist on it, only they don’t know your right name or where you live, and by the time the party is over they’re usually too looped to care anyway.”

“Keep smiling and sidestepping,” said Miss Withers dryly. “Ill certainly remember that, if the situation ever comes up. But, my dear young woman, if you were away from home *doing a dinner* as you put it, then how can you swear that your husband was safe beside his own hearth curled up with a good book? How do you know he wasn’t right here in this room at eleven o’clock that night, murdering Miss Harrington?”

“But—” Natalie put in, and then caught Miss Withers’ look.

“Listen,” Chloris said. “The dinner that night was for a bunch of out-of-town furniture buyers, and those boys like to feel the upholstery. It got very drunk out very early if you know what I mean, and I got tired of having my framework appraised. Usually at those things you’re supposed to stick around until midnight at least, but I went to whoever was in charge and soft-talked him into giving me my dough and letting me sneak out early. I got home a couple of minutes before eleven, and there was Riff passed out on the sofa in the living room. He’d been there all evening, too.”

“And how could you tell that?” pursued the schoolteacher mercilessly. “Did you hide his shoes?”

“You’ve never been married, have you? Oh, there’s a dozen ways to tell. By the empties, for one thing. It takes about three pints to put Riff away. And the ashtrays were all full, and newspapers and racing forms scattered around. He’d finished a crossword puzzle, and tried to finish some old song of his that never comes out right, which he only tackles when he’s half-swacked.”

Miss Withers found herself humming a phrase of it, and hastily said, “Go on.”

“Well, I took off his shoes and left him to sleep it off where he was. Next morning he didn’t remember where he’d got his load or what he’d done, so when he heard about the murder of his ex-girl friend he tipped off the boys to alibi for him. Not that the police asked too many questions, because they were pretty sure they already had the case sewed up in a sack.”

“I see,” said the schoolteacher. She scowled at Natalie Rowan, who had her mouth open and was about, it appeared, to put her foot in it. “Well, Mrs. Sprott, you can rest assured that this will be brought to the attention of Inspector Piper at Headquarters.”

“And will you get him to call off his bloodhounds?”

“I shall do my best,” promised Miss Withers, not saying her best *what*. “Neither Mrs. Rowan nor myself has any desire to make trouble for the innocent. But we are trying hard to make trouble for the one who killed Midge Harrington.”

“Natch,” said the girl. She looked at her watch and gave a little squeal. “I’ve gotta get back to the gin-mill and warble.” She started for the door. “You won’t forget, now?”

Miss Withers shook her head, and the front door slammed. “Well,” said Natalie, “that seems to eliminate one suspect, if she’s telling the truth.”

“Does it? The girl has effectively destroyed her husband’s alibi for that night—an alibi which was good enough to satisfy the police at the time.”

“But—” Natalie frowned with concentration. “She’s given him another one. Only I thought the police figured that Midge Harrington died around ten o’clock, not eleven!”

“Exactly. I baited a little trap, and Chloris fell for it hook, line and sinker. She says she got home at eleven. That would still leave him plenty of time to commit the murder, then come home and set the stage to create the impression he’d been there all evening. It wouldn’t be hard to spread around newspapers and racing forms, dirty up the ashtrays, and maybe even empty a couple of pints of whisky down the drain. Then he could take a stiff drink, pour a little of the nasty stuff over his clothes, and lie down and look and smell exactly as if he’d passed out hours before.”

Mrs. Rowan looked a little happier. Then her face clouded again. “But Riff Sprott can’t be the one we’re looking for. Because even if he doesn’t have an alibi for the first murder, he must have for the second. He’s working in a night club, you said.”

“Until tonight, yes. But the dinner show is seven to nine, supper show eleven to one. I checked that when I visited The Grotto. He had plenty of time between appearances. Judging by the smell of the place, any musician working there would have to go out for some fresh air, and it would be easy to slip away from the others.”

“But—but the police were shadowing him? How could he have got away from them long enough—”

“He didn’t,” said Miss Withers. “Because they weren’t. I just hinted that when we had our heart-to-heart talk that first day, to stir things up. With the idea planted in his mind, the rest of it was just a case of overactive imagination. Riff Sprott is seeing police shadows behind every lamp post.”

Natalie was bubbling over. “Then Sprott has a guilty conscience—you’ve proved it! That means he’s guilty—”

“No, not necessarily. I’ve simply put forward an hypothesis. We haven’t any real proof, not yet. And remember the old saying—if you sent an anonymous telegram to a hundred men picked at random out of the phone book, saying FLEE, ALL IS DISCOVERED! ninety of them would leave town that night.”

“Oh, dear,” sighed Natalie Rowan, very much deflated again. “You just build me up and then let me down ...”

The phone went off like a firecracker, and Miss Withers jumped a good inch into the air. “That’ll be Iris,” cried Natalie quickly. “I just knew she wouldn’t disappear without a word, not when I owe her her last week’s pay check.” She rushed out into the hall, cried an eager, welcoming “Hello?” into the phone, and then was silent.

The schoolteacher, straining her ears in vain, became conscious of a sharp pain in her chest, and realized that she was forgetting to breathe. She tried to remember bits of her old first-aid training—if this was another of those maniac calls, Natalie would probably faint or throw a fit. She was about to rise and go to the rescue, when she heard the woman saying, “Yes, I’ve got it. Thank you.”

Natalie came back into the room with what was almost the ghost of a smile on her face. “It wasn’t Iris after all. Just a wire from Mr. Huff, from Ossining. Tomorrow is his day off and he’ll be down in town. He’s so kind and thoughtful—he’s going to drop over in the evening and give me a firsthand eye-witness account of how Andy is bearing up.” She peered at Miss Withers. “What’s the matter? You look so strange. There isn’t

anything really wrong about a keeper calling on the relatives of a prisoner, is there?"

The schoolteacher sighed deeply. "No, I imagine not. It's only that—well, to be frank, I was afraid the call was from someone else. The telephone can be as surprising as a grab bag sometimes."

"It's a fearful nuisance as far as I'm concerned," Natalie said sensibly. "Nine-tenths of the calls I get are a sheer waste of time. It's an unlisted number, too. But I guess every newspaper in town has assigned a cub reporter to try to get an interview with me, or a picture staged with me weeping over Andy's photograph. And guess what happened today just after lunch, when I was trying to relax my snarled nerves in a hot bath? Some nitwit called up and when I came dripping down to answer the phone, instead of saying anything he just laughed and laughed! Did I give him a piece of my mind!"

Miss Withers, a little dizzy, found a chair and leaned against it. "Is there anything the matter?" Mrs. Rowan asked anxiously.

"Nothing," admitted the schoolteacher. "But this phone call—didn't it strike you as odd or anything?"

The woman shook her head. "Just plain *silly*!"

"Because, you see, I received one too, and so did Iris. The call then didn't frighten you into wanting to drop everything and run away and hide?"

Natalie's smile was scornful. "I don't scare that easy."

"But didn't the laughter strike you as menacing, unearthly and inhuman?"

She shook her head again. "Just silly. But maybe I'm lacking in imagination."

The schoolteacher hesitated, suddenly self-critical. Would she herself have let the phone call get under her skin if she had not first caught the contagion of fear from Iris? "You're quite sensible," she decided. "But all the same, there is dirty work at the crossroads. Our quarry is showing a certain tendency to stop being the Hunted and become the Hunter. Remembering what happened to two women already, do you think it is safe for you to be alone in this big empty house?"

"No," said Natalie. "Only—"

"How about a maid or a paid companion?"

“But if I did call an agency, how do I know they wouldn’t sneak some girl reporter or photographer in under false pretenses? I can’t stand the thought of that.” Natalie shook her head. “Unless—unless you yourself would consent to come here!”

“I?” Miss Withers stiffened a little.

“Especially since Iris has deserted, I’d like somebody around, somebody who knows.”

There were many reasons why not. “I’d miss telephone calls and visitors,” objected the schoolteacher. “And there’s my plants to water, and Talleyrand—”

“You could bring your dog along, he’d be an added protection!”

The schoolteacher snorted. “Talley is in love with the whole human race. If Jack the Ripper crawled in through a window at midnight Talley would probably hold the flashlight for him, or fetch him a rubber ball to throw.”

“He’d be something alive and cheerful around the place, anyway. Oh, do say you’ll come!” She hesitated. “If money would make any difference —”

“*Please!*”

“Oh dear, I didn’t mean to offend you. But you see, I’m not intellectual like you, or beautiful like the girl who was just here. All I have, all I ever had, is just plenty of money. And I’d spend every cent of it to save Andy.”

“I know,” said Miss Withers. “And I’ll consider your suggestion. But you see, I must be a free agent if I’m to have any chance of success.”

“Oh, you’ll succeed, I know it. As I told Iris that day after you walked in to the rescue like a boat from the blue, I knew right away that you were going to bring my Andy back to me safe and sound. You’re an instrument of Providence.”

“Perhaps,” said the schoolteacher, feeling herself to be a rather blunted tool at the moment. If only she could share Natalie Rowan’s confidence—

The case, to her mind, wasn’t going according to Hoyle. The suspects, in spite of all her efforts, kept dancing away like wills-o’-the-wisp. By this time her intuitive guesses should be condensing into a hard certainty. Had she perhaps made the cardinal mistake of underestimating an opponent?

Again Miss Withers was reminded of the old story about the man on a train who played cards with His Satanic Majesty, and was dealt a perfect

hand with all four aces. And then the devil led out the green Ace of Higgogriffs.

“I love fools’ experiments. I am always making them.”  
—*Charles Darwin*

## 9.

THE MAIDEN SCHOOLTEACHER’S FIRST thought on arriving home was of a comfortable pair of slippers, and her second of the telephone. Oscar Piper’s home phone did not answer; he was probably out tomcatting somewhere. But on a long chance she rang Centre Street. The Headquarters switchboard was jammed, but finally she got through to homicide and heard a familiar voice. “Oscar!” she cried. “I have news for you!”

“Ditto here,” he said genially. “Yours first.”

But curiosity was her besetting sin. “Oh, I know what you’ve got to tell me. You traced the license number of that automobile I asked you about, the swanky imported British Jaguar that belongs to Iris Dunn’s boy friend. But that’s beside the point—”

“Is it?” interrupted the Inspector dryly. “Oh, we traced it all right, through the motor vehicle department. But unless you’re barking up the wrong tree again, Iris is moving in pretty high circles. That car is registered in the name of Sir Geoffrey Giddings, a staff member of the British delegation to the UN. Age sixty, three married daughters, Knight Commander of the Bath, hobbies are chess and grouse-shooting. He has an apartment on the third floor of that same building. Of course, some of those old boys like to have a fling, but—”

“No!” she said disconsolately. “Impossible.”

“Sixty isn’t so old!” the Inspector protested indignantly.

“Perhaps not, but nobody named Geoffrey would ever get the nickname of *Bill*. Besides, the boy who came hurrying into that apartment building and rushed up to Iris’ floor hadn’t even seen twenty-five yet. I’m afraid that when I saw the car I leaped to conclusions.”

“As usual,” Piper told her. “But never mind that now. Remember what I said last night about having the murderer of Marika in forty-eight hours, and this afternoon about cutting it to twenty-four? Too bad you didn’t bet with me. Because just for your private information we’ve got Banana-Nose —”

“Oscar!” she shrieked. “You haven’t arrested that Wilson man, you mustn’t! He didn’t—”

“Oh yes, he did. I was about to say, we’ve got him pinned down in a tenement over on Tenth Avenue. He’s armed and desperate, and the main problem is how to get hold of him without losing any policemen in the process. A whole city block is roped off, and the boys are taking no chances.”

“Good heavens!” she cried. “Who’s responsible for that—not you, I hope?”

“I sent out the pick-up order, and one thing leads to another.”

“Goodbye, Oscar,” she said.

“Hey, wait a minute. Didn’t you have something to tell me?”

“All I have to tell you at the moment,” said Miss Hildegard Withers acidly, “is that now you’ve put your foot in it up to your ears. I can’t explain why now—I’ve got to rush down there to the scene of this three-ring circus and put a stop to it.” She hung up.

The Inspector buried his face momentarily in his hands. “Holy Saint Paul and Minneapolis,” he moaned. “When Hildegard gets into one of her Curfew Shall Not Ring moods—” Then he pressed a key and shouted into the talk-box, “Order me a car, quick!”

But the schoolteacher, with a considerable head start on him, was already in a taxi headed south. “Lady, what number on Tent’?” the driver demanded.

“Just keep driving. You’ll know when you get there.”

It seemed that everybody in Manhattan knew, for the massed humanity outside the police lines was only slightly less than at the Polo Grounds on a hot Saturday afternoon. Emergency trucks, ambulances, squad cars, and firemen’s hook-and-ladder trucks blocked the street at both ends, while mobile floodlights made everything brighter and whiter than day. People had been evacuated from the tenement, the neighboring buildings and those across the street, and now more than three hundred policemen crawled over the rooftops, sniped from commandeered windows across the way, and blockaded the stairway leading up to the top-floor cold-water flat where the fugitive had holed up and dared anybody to come in after him. The glaring lights, the roped-off street, and occasional popping explosions gave it all the festive air of a Fourth of July neighborhood block party. But the only firecrackers were shots from the Browning automatic rifles, the riot guns, or



the police-positive .38s and the heavier .45 automatics, as some overenthusiastic policeman let go in the general direction of the invisible guest of honor, with no appreciable result except the shattering of a good deal of window glass.

Since the building was four storeys high, most of the tear-gas grenades aimed at the gaping front windows fell back into the street to add to the confusion. Those that did hit the target were warmly applauded by the crowd outside the ropes, who also cheered lustily when Banana-Nose scooped them up, red hot though they were, and hurled them back at the little groups of snipers. Some he must also have tossed down the stairs, for the squad of officers who had been working their way painfully up toward the top floor erupted suddenly into the street again, gasping and crying for gas masks.

Somehow, in spite of the best efforts of police and firemen, a large number of neighborhood urchins infiltrated the lines, as did newsreel cameramen with portable Eyemos, press photographers, and a few amateur lens hounds with miniature cameras and homemade Press cards hopefully stuck in their hats. Also Miss Hildegard Withers, who somehow managed to sneak under the ropes and scuttle forward under desultory fire to the spot where Captain F. X. Carmody had set up command headquarters in the partial shelter of a doorway.

“This has got to stop!” gasped the schoolteacher. “You can’t butcher this man to make a Roman holiday! He happens to be innocent, and—”

“Lady, go away,” said the captain over his shoulder, not daring to take his eyes from the blank, gaping windows high across the street.

“But the Wilson man didn’t commit that murder, and I can prove it!”

Captain Carmody didn’t care if the fugitive was wanted for murder or for moper, he was sniping at cops. “Get outta here, lady—do you want to get shot?”

“I don’t want anybody to get shot! Can’t you declare an armistice or something for half an hour?” As the man still ignored her, she added, “If *you* won’t listen, I’ll go to the Commissioner, I’ll go to the Mayor!”

Captain Carmody brightened. “That’s a fine idea, ma’am.” He seized a patrolman who had just come up for instructions. “Here, Schwartz, this lady wants to explain to His Honor why the whole shebang has to be called off right away. Take her down the street and show her where his car is, will you?”

The man saluted, and then gallantly escorted the schoolteacher back out of the line of fire. “The Mayor will certainly listen to reason,” she was saying as they hurried along. “Even though they say he used to be a policeman himself. Of course, it might be better still if you’d hold your fire and let me go up that stairs and have a few words with the fugitive. If I explained to him that it’s really all a mistake—”

“Banana-Nose Wilson ain’t exactly in a mood to have his better nature appealed to,” the officer told her jovially. “But you go ahead and ask the Mayor what he thinks of the idea, and if he says okay then it’s all right with me. Here we are—upsadaisy and in you go!”

Miss Withers had taken the first step up before it occurred to her that the Mayor of New York City was not apt to be watching events from the shelter of a paddy-wagon, and by then it was too late. She was pushed on in by a practiced hand applied to the small of her back, and the door clanged shut with a dismal finality.

Even so, the schoolteacher missed only the last scene of the last act of the manhunt. A moment after the door of the Black Maria closed upon her, Inspector Oscar Piper joined Carmody at command headquarters a block away, in time to see Banana-Nose Wilson fling a soiled bed sheet out of the tenement window as a token of surrender.

The captain, sighing with relief, picked up the microphone of the public address system, and walked a few steps into the open, trailing wires behind. “All right, Wilson. Can you hear this? Fling your guns out of the window. Fling your guns out of the window into the street!” His voice, magnified to stentorian proportions, echoed up and down the Avenue, rattling the remaining windowpanes ...

A pistol, and then another, came arcing out of the smashed window, flashed in the glare of the searchlights and clattered on the asphalt.

“Come out of there with your hands up! Come out of there and start down the stairs with your hands up!” Carmody handed the mike to one of his men and turned to the Inspector. “Well, that’s that.”

Piper agreed that that was that, and a good thing, too. “Any casualties?”

“Nothing too serious. I guess Wilson shut both eyes tight every time he pulled the trigger.” They started across the street, to be nearly trampled to death by the rush of photographers lining up before the tenement steps. After a rather long wait six policemen emerged, each grasping some part of

the anatomy of a small, very disheveled rabbit of a man with a top-heavy nose and reddish, streaming eyes. Flash bulbs went off like heat lightning in silent explosions, newsreel cameras whirled ...

“Hold him by the collar, sergeant. Well, okay, you’ll *be* a sergeant for this. Now give us that great big smile—”

A man with a portable microphone ran forward and held it up to the prisoner. “Say something, Banana-Nose,” he pleaded hoarsely. “Say something for the television audience!”

Banana-Nose Wilson said something, and Channel Four went dark all over the nation, though not quite soon enough to prevent the kiddies from learning some new words. What happened next has been argued in newspaper columns and in police squad rooms ever since, but the general consensus is that in the jockeying of his uniformed captors for photogenic positions, Wilson found himself momentarily free and started to run. It is also possible that he was camera-shy, and only trying to get away from the barricade of lenses. At any rate, the man started back into the building and was immediately shot in the back by Captain F. X. Carmody, who had aimed for the knee but had forgotten the heavy trigger pull of a .45.

“Saving the State the expense of a trial and execution,” as Inspector Oscar Piper observed later to Miss Withers, in a cozy corner of a reception room in the women’s observation ward at Bellevue. He had to raise his voice, as a lady in the nearby dormitory was bedded down in a nest of imaginary tarantulas and howling for someone to come and take them away.

“Nothing is well about it, and nothing is ended!” the schoolteacher snapped at him. She was wearing a dingy gray bathrobe, much too small for her. “Oscar Piper, are you actually going to let them keep me here in this awful place all night?”

“I should,” he told her. “I honestly should, at that! It might be a lesson to you. Why on earth you wanted to go interfering with Captain Carmody in the midst of the biggest manhunt since Two-Gun Crowley—”

“It was my duty,” she said. “I don’t expect any thanks for it, but I was only trying to save you from the worst mistake of your life, that’s all. Because Banana-Nose Wilson wasn’t—”

“He was!” interrupted Piper wearily. “But well go into that later. Okay, Hildegard, you can go as soon as the man at the desk can dig your papers out of the file and tear them up. Carmody could insist on your being held for routine observation, but he’s in a good mood. The newspapers are

playing him up as the hero of the day, or will when we give a go-ahead on the story. I'm holding it back for the confession ..."

"Hero of the day!" Miss Withers said. "Just because he shot that poor man?"

The Inspector scowled. "Say, maybe you *do* belong in here after all. You've got some sort of fixation or something about Wilson's innocence. The man fits the description. His head is the right size for the hat we found under Marika's body, or near enough."

"And what about the rest of it? Does his hair match the bits found in the hat?"

"No, but—"

"And was he in Texas at the right time to have bought it?"

"He was in Auburn Prison," the Inspector told her. "But he has unusual physical development, like most sneak-thieves, and could easily have vaulted those fences out in back of Marika's apartment, which is more indicative. The man was a born thief, probably it was somebody else's hat and he just lifted it off a hook in some restaurant. Don't weep for Banana-Nose—he's a habitual criminal, and that flat of his was as full of loot as Ali Baba's cave. Our men found nine radios, a gross of expensive cameras, a bushel basket of watches, and enough table silver and jewelry to start a store. Evidently he's been improving his time between visits to the probation officer with pursuing his old trade hot and heavy ..."

At that moment they were interrupted by a brawny policewoman, who laid Miss Withers' clothes, hat and purse on a chair and said that she could go free after signing the usual release and property slip. The Inspector nodded, and started for the door.

"I'll be with you in half a moment," said the much relieved schoolteacher. "Oscar, I *am* grateful to you for rushing over here to get me out of Bedlam!"

He stopped in the doorway, grinning. "Okay, but I didn't know you were here until just now. I rode over in the ambulance with Wilson, hoping he'd make a confession. He's upstairs in surgery now."

Miss Withers gasped. "You mean, he isn't *dead*?"

"Not quite. But it's just a question of time, with a hole like that through him. When and if he comes out of the ether we'll have another try at him. I'm sending for Mrs. Fink, too—I'd like her to cinch the thing with a positive identification."

“Which, of course, she will, though what legal standing it will have—” Miss Withers sniffed and threw back her head, then clutched wildly at the skimpy bathrobe. “Oscar, if you don’t *mind* I’d like to dress in private.”

“One thing I like is a good loser,” said the Inspector, and departed. When he got over into the criminal hospital wing he saw the unconscious Wilson on a stretcher already being wheeled down the hall by an orderly, the resident surgeon walking along behind.

“Did all I could for him,” said the medico wearily. “But you should have seen his insides. He’s a scrambled egg.”

Piper winced visibly, and wanted to know how long. Peeling off rubber gloves, the surgeon told him any time—hours, maybe days. It was only in the movies that a man dropped dead when shot, unless the slug happened to rip through heart or windpipe or certain parts of the brain. Though the result was usually the same.

“Any chance of his regaining consciousness before the end?”

The doctor, not so callous after all, said he sincerely hoped not, for the man’s own sake. A hole through the upper intestines was one of the more painful ways of dying. Pressed further, he admitted that if a statement from the doomed man was of vital importance he could have a try at bringing him to. After the ether wore off, of course. A mammoth jolt of benzedrine sulphate might do it, plus morphine to deaden the pain.

“Then try,” ordered the Inspector. “We need a deathbed statement.”

He went back down the hall, hung up his coat and hat, and made himself comfortable in a creaky wicker chair by the elevators, lighting up a greenish-brown cigar and smiling in spite of himself at the memory of Hildegard Withers trying to be forceful and dignified in a skimpy hospital-issued bathrobe. It had been the high spot of his day.

More than an hour passed before Mrs. Fink hove in sight, convoyed by two harassed-looking policemen. The landlady was in high dudgeon having, it developed, already retired for the night. She was distinctly in a non-cooperative mood.

But the Inspector turned on his best public-relations smile, and his seldom-used brogue. “Sure, and this is positively the last you’ll be bothered,” he assured her. “And it must be a considerable source of satisfaction to you to know that your description, and your identification of the drawing and photographs of this man Wilson, resulted in his capture in

record time. Tis only that we want to tie things up nice and neat by having you take a look at him when he wakes up.”

“I’m barely awake myself,” vented Mrs. Fink. “I hadda get up and get dressed and be dragged alla way down here just to look at him?”

“I know, I know. But you’re a very important figure in this case,” Piper went on. “The only person who got a look at the murderer, you know—except for the victim. I shouldn’t be surprised at all if some newspaper made you a good offer for your first-person story. You’ll have your picture in the *News* and the *Journal-American*.” He took her arm. “Right down the hall, please.” They came at last to the door. “Now if you’ll wait out here just a moment—”

The Inspector went into the bare little hospital room, with its one barred window and white iron bed. The doctor was sitting on the window ledge, morosely smoking a cigarette. Sergeant Smith, complete with notebook, hovered over the prisoner, but there was a somewhat baffled expression in his eye. Banana-Nose Wilson, slow to die, had reacted quickly to the injections and was now in the elated, euphoric stage of morphine.

“What a show!” he was saying, in a wheezy whisper. “All the cops in town, lights, firemen, newsreels—just to take one little guy who never hurt anybody in his whole career! I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t been there. Did I make a splash or didn’t I?”

“He denies the Thoren murder, Inspector,” Smitty said in a low tone as he conferred with his superior in a corner. “Says he was out that night on a prowl job somewhere down in the Village, he doesn’t remember just where. It’s not much of an alibi—there were three or four sneak jobs pulled down there last night, but it’s a regular thing. And he wants to know why he got the slug thrown at him—”

Piper nodded. “He wanted to draw our fire, so he could cheat the chair.”

“Or cheat the Baumes Law. Next conviction it’s life for him as a habitual criminal. That’s his story.” They moved over toward the bed, and the sergeant said brightly, “Well, Wilson, here’s the Inspector to see you!”

Banana-Nose whispered two words, one of which was “copper.”

“There’s still a little time to set the record straight, Wilson,” the Inspector said gravely. “You’ve got nothing to lose now by talking. You want to check out with a clear conscience, don’t you? I suppose you know

that you were seen going up the stairs of that house on Ninety-sixth Street a few minutes before Marika Thoren died.”

“Now you ask *anybody*,” Banana-Nose said. “*I* always go up fire escapes.”

“But we know this wasn’t just another job. Marika was expecting you, or she wouldn’t have let you in. She was your girl friend, wasn’t she?”

“Wrong again. My weakness is horses.”

“What’d you do with the money you took out of her cash box?”

Wilson laughed, a little wildly. “Why, I found myself a million dollars all in nickels and dimes and I sat around and counted ’em a million times. Don’t be silly, copper. If I’d had any dough I’d have taken a powder out of town the minute I heard I was wanted, instead of holing up in a flat ...” His voice trailed away to the shadow of a whisper, and Piper saw the doctor’s warning finger making circular motions indicative of a need for hurry.

Piper sighed, and nodded to the sergeant. “Okay, Smitty, bring her in.” And then, as Mrs. Fink and her escort came into the room, “All right, is this him?”

The landlady, puffed with pride and importance, came closer and stared at the man on the bed, who stared back blankly and then shut his eyes tight. But she cocked her head on one side, in an unconscious imitation of an art critic at an exhibition. “He had a hat and trenchcoat on,” Mrs. Fink said doubtfully.

“Okay, okay,” Piper reassured her. “We can’t stage a regular identification parade for you under the circumstances. Just look at this man’s face. Look at his most distinguishing features, the eyes and nose. Is he the one you saw last night?”

“I—I don’t know,” she began. “I guess so. Yes, that’s him all right. Only the nose was different, pinker sort of.”

“Never mind the color, his wound would account for that. Is the shape right?”

“Yes—but he had glasses on.”

“Never mind the glasses!” In spite of himself the Inspector raised his voice.

“Yessir,” Mrs. Fink hastily conceded. “Like you say, that’s the man.”

“Never *mind* what I say—oh, all right. I guess that’s good enough.” He nodded at the officers. “You can haul her back home.”

Eager as a schoolboy at recess-time, the landlady headed for the door. But it was slowly opening inward, to disclose a tall figure in a trenchcoat, topped by a man's hat with snapped-down brim. The face was oddly owl-like, with hornrimmed glasses set too close together and a beak that put Banana-Nose to shame.

Mrs. Fink froze. She pointed a trembling finger, shrieking, "Oh my God, that's *really* him!" and then fainted dead away in the sergeant's unwilling arms.

The apparition opened its mouth and spoke, in measured accents. "Ah, gentlemen, what a nose is that! One cannot look upon such a specimen of the nasigera without exclaiming, 'No, truly, the man exaggerates ...' After that, one smiles, one says: 'He will take it off ...' But Monsieur de Bergerac never takes it off at all. Which, by the way, is where I and Rostand's hero differ." The figure raised one arm to strip off the eyeglasses and the pink latex nose attached to them, disclosing the weatherbeaten but triumphant face of Miss Hildegard Withers.

"You'd never have believed it if I hadn't demonstrated," explained the schoolteacher anxiously. "Would you, Oscar?"

"Judas Priest in a jug!" exploded the Inspector savagely, recognizing too late his own hat and coat "How—I—I mean—" He was choking.

"How did I get into the ward? The policeman at the gate remembered me from the Larsen case. I simply explained to him that I had something very important to deliver to you. And here it is—it cost me thirty cents on the Hallowe'en novelty counter of the drugstore down the street." With a sweeping gesture she handed him the comic rubber nose.



“Patience, and shuffle the cards.”  
—*Cervantes*

## 10.

EVEN AS THE KEY TURNED IN the hall door, Talleyrand knew with a poodle’s sixth sense that something was wrong. He yawned, wagged a tentative tail, and hastily began to search his conscience. True, there was the matter of the tom-up newspaper, but he had already had his scolding for that. Talley could think of no other misdemeanor, and wisely decided that his mistress was upset about something out of his ken.

But it might be just as well, he thought, to omit the joyful leaping and barking ceremonies usually attendant upon her return. Nor was sympathy indicated, considering the way Miss Withers rushed around turning off lights and slamming doors and talking to herself. When Talley heard her washing her hair he knew that the storm warnings were flying indeed, and he folded his paws over his whiskery apricot muzzle and played very dead dog.

The schoolteacher finally climbed into her own bed with the everlasting *War and Peace*, but as usual she bogged down in chapter three of that celebrated classic. Finally she switched off the light. Not that she’d sleep a wink tonight, she told herself wearily. The sting of Oscar Piper’s tongue-lashing outside the hospital room at Bellevue still rankled, somehow. Their friendship dated back to their first meeting over a corpse in the penguin pool of the old Aquarium down at the Battery, which was more years ago than she liked to count. It had sometimes been a stormy one, with considerable differences of opinion, but never any rift as wide and as deep as this. From the man’s attitude you would think she had stabbed him in the back instead of saving him from a terrible, irrevocable mistake.

Granted that from his point of view she *had* been a little overdramatic in bursting in on the identification scene at the hospital, in front of an audience. Men hated to be made to seem ridiculous, even when they were. Especially when they were.

Now that it was too late Miss Withers could think of a lot of devastating things she could have said to the Inspector, and she lay awake

in the pitchy darkness while she phrased them most bitingly, getting it all out of her system. She toyed briefly with the idea of getting up and ringing him on the phone, just to have the last word. But the man would probably be asleep. Probably everybody was asleep at this hour—everybody but her. The schoolteacher tried counting sheep, but there were so many black ones among them, and the black ones were so much more interesting ...

Miss Withers was not so alone in her wakefulness as she fondly imagined. Over the curve of the horizon to the southwest, in the prim and chilly guest room of a Main Line mansion in old Philadelphia, Iris Dunn lay propped against three down pillows in a great canopied walnut bed, waiting. She had been waiting for a long time.

Iris was listening, and watching the door. The house was very quiet, too quiet. There was not even the companionable sound of passing autos outside, or streetcars or anything. Suddenly she was desperately homesick for the friendly, bustling, perpetual din of Manhattan.

“What a place to hide!” she said to herself. From where she lay she could see the old-fashioned iron key in the door, but it was not locked. She had even got up once to make sure that it wasn’t locked. To make it easy for him. Maybe she had made it too easy for him. Because he didn’t come and he kept not coming.

For a while after she had been packed off to bed there had been a rumble of voices downstairs in the drawing room, but now that was over. If he had told them—*what* he had told them, was a mystery to Iris.

She thought of quietly getting up and going out into the hall and trying to find Bill’s room. If she met anybody in the hall she could say she was going down to the library for a book to read. No, that was no good. There was a book right over there on the table, and as far as Iris was concerned it could stay there. She could say she was looking for the john—no, that wouldn’t work either, because there was a big marble bath attached to her own room, “a bath like a movie set for a not-so-Gay Nineties picture. And if she went prowling and trying doors she’d probably miss Bill’s room entirely and walk in on his mother, that patrician prune, or one of the dowdy wool-stockinged sisters, or the fat aunt who had tried to put her at ease during dinner by discussing Richard Mansfield and Maude Adams.

Iris suddenly slid out of bed, went over to the full-length dressing mirror and modeled the extra-special, sixty-dollar nightgown for a moment. Satin and pink rosebuds, yet. The salesgirl had assured her that she would

look just like a picture-book bride. What she really looked like was a chorus girl who had wandered into a museum by mistake.

“There is something about this place that makes me want to say four-letter words over and over,” Iris told her reflection in the mirror. She tried it, speaking very softly. Then she made a face at herself, flung off the nightgown, let down her flaming hair and wiped off every bit of make-up, even the lipstick.

“Now he’ll come,” she murmured. “Sure as shooting he’ll come tiptoeing in and find me looking like the hag at eve.”

But the door didn’t open. Iris opened the window and stood shivering before it, seeing nothing outside but trees already getting a little gaunt and bare of leaves. Even the air here didn’t smell right. It was flavorless and weak, cut with too much branch water. And it made goose pimples all over her. She turned out the light and flung herself between the stiff, chilly sheets.

“He’ll come before I count to a hundred by fives,” she promised herself. But she got to five hundred, and stopped.

“Maybe they locked him in his room. Maybe they sent him away to join the French Foreign Legion, with a threat of disinheriting him if he didn’t. Maybe—maybe he broke a leg. I hope.”

The house creaked. Even the bed creaked when she moved, protestingly. She was here on sufferance, because Bill had brought her, and the house and everybody and everything in it was waiting for her to realize that she wasn’t wanted, and leave.

Somewhere, far far away downstairs, there was the muffled ringing of a telephone. It rang on and on for a long time and then stopped, making the silence seem worse than ever.

Iris could hear her heart beating. She could hear the ticking of her watch. That was all there was, all she had. And after she had waited so long, and worked so hard. After she had done what she had done, and pretended and lied, this was the climax, to be alone in a cold unfriendly bed in a cold unfriendly house. It was, Iris thought, one hell of a honeymoon.

Finally she slept, on a rather damp pillow. Back in Manhattan Miss Hildegard Withers was sleeping too, a troubled sleep in which she found herself desperately engaged in working a crossword puzzle—something she would never have bothered with when awake and in her right mind.

Possibly one of the abstruse double-crostics in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, but a crossword never.

Yet here she was. According to the arbitrary rules imposed by some invisible but menacing tribunal, she could use only a fountain pen to fill in the spaces, no changes or erasures permitted. And there was a time limit, a deadline, drawing steadily closer ...

“Average time 72 hours,” it said at the top of the sheet. No, it read, “*Remaining* time.” But that was also Andy Rowan’s life expectancy.

She got off to a flying start on the horizontals. “Noisy expression of derision,” in eight letters would have to be *laughter*. “Flora exotic” would be *orchid*. “Linked ornament,” became *necklace*, “glass ball” was *crystal*, and “disguise” was *false-face*. There was the usual rash of irritating little fill-in words such as puzzle editors love—“the fifth note of Guido’s scale,” “printer’s unit of measure,” “Greek god of love,” “to plant (Saxon verb)” and, of course, the inevitable “winged” which must be *alar*.

Which wickedly suggested flight, and the schoolteacher saw her dream dissolve into fleecy clouds, through which she soared free at last from all puzzles and problems. She flapped her arms frantically but something drew her implacably back to earth, back to the crossword. She crash-landed on a field of white squares mottled with occasional blacks in a pattern that resembled a grinning skull.

There was the fountain pen in her hand again, and she scribbled frantically to make up for lost time. But it was a queer sort of puzzle. Something was wrong with the definitions, as in a bad translation. Instead of being synonyms the words began to go by opposites or quite at random, as if this were a psychologist’s word-association test. “Will” proved to be *won’t*, and “key” was *note*. The word *indemnity* showed up twice, breaking one of the unwritten laws of puzzledom.

And the verticals were worse yet, when she got around to them. “After death” turned out to be *posthumorous*, which was silly. Jabberwocky words, like something created by a malevolent Lewis Carroll, began to appear. Then at last the schoolteacher came to number 22 down, which tied the whole puzzle together. Its definition was “Ecce Homo,” which she immediately translated as “Take a look at the murderer.” No, the first word was “Cherchez”—which amounted to about the same thing. In five letters—no, eight. The squares merged and dissolved and shimmered so that Miss Withers wasn’t sure just how many spaces there were. But some of them

were already filled in, with overlapping words. Her pen flashed frantically, printing in the remaining letters. It was suddenly all coming right, like apple jelly jelling when you had almost given it up.

There at last was the name of the murderer. "Good gracious!" cried the schoolteacher. "Of course, I should have known it from the beginning. And won't Oscar be surprised! But what if I don't remember it in the morning?"

For she had a canny way of being aware, even in her dreams, that it was only a dream. But she had got the better of her elfin subconscious before. Craftily she reached out for the book she had left lying on her bedside table, picked up the pen and wrote the all-important name on the flyleaf. "There!" she told herself triumphantly.

It was all so real, so exceptionally vivid, that when Talley awakened her by scratching on her bedroom door in the early morning Miss Withers sat up straight in bed and seized *War and Peace*. But there was nothing on the flyleaf, absolutely nothing, except a scribbled "Merry Christmas 1939" above Oscar Piper's signature.

"Oh!" she cried in deep disgust. "There are times," she told the eager poodle as she opened the bedroom door, "when just as every dog is supposed to be allowed one bite, every well-bred person should be allowed one swear-word!"

Inspector Oscar Piper, for his part, had used up considerably more than his quota of profanity even before he got down to Centre Street that morning. The office was small and bare, comparing not too favorably in size and appointments with the cell up the river in which Andy Rowan waited for his last summons. Its one window had a fine view of a faded brick wall, its decorations consisted of two photographs of forgotten ex-mayors and a framed group picture of the New York Police Academy class of 1919, and it was furnished with a battered oak desk, a perpetually clacking teletype machine, a bookcase, four uncomfortable chairs and a spittoon.

But the Inspector loved it. It had been his throne room, his sanctum sanctorum, for almost two decades, barring one regrettable hiatus when he had been kicked upstairs to the temporary grade of acting chief inspector. Now as he opened up the place this Friday morning he realized that it might very well be for the last time.

His after-breakfast cigar tasted like smoldering rags, and he let it die unnoticed on the edge of his desk. There was the usual pile of mail on his

blotter but he pushed it aside, having learned from long experience that if you let letters go unanswered for a week or so they are no longer in need of answering. He sighed, pressed a lever on the talk-box, and said "Smitty, come in here!"

The sergeant appeared almost instantly, looking offensively bright and chipper in tweeds and a blue polka-dot tie. "Good morning, Inspector!"

"What's good about it?" growled Inspector Piper. "Anything new, as if I cared?"

"The Commissioner's office called, and also the DA. I think they want to know just what charges there are against Wilson."

"Naturally. How about possession, of stolen property, firearms, and resisting arrest?"

"Yes, sir." Sergeant Smith looked doubtful. "All the newspapers called, too. Not just reporters, either. City editors, managing editors, big shots like that."

"Refer 'em to Boylan." Lieutenant Boylan was the newly appointed public relation officer, working out of the Municipal Building.

"But he refers them right back here, sir. And the newspaper boys aren't going to stand for this *hold* order on the Wilson story much longer. After all, it was the biggest manhunt in years, and thousands of people saw it happen. The press has a pretty good idea that we didn't turn out most of the available force last night just to pick up a petty second-storey worker for violating his parole."

"You and your encyclopedia memory!" Piper jabbed, "If you'd just kept your big mouth shut—" He shook his head.

"Never mind, I should have known better. Just what was the final score on casualties?"

"Outside of Banana-Nose himself, five policemen got in their own crossfire, hit by stray bullets or ricochets. None seriously. Seven treated for tear gas, all but two returned to duty. One minor concussion from being hit on the head by a falling gas bomb. Among the spectators, one heart attack from the excitement and two or three minor bruises and lacerations from being trampled in the crush."

"Fine, fine!" said the Inspector with heavy sarcasm. "What's from Bellevue? Is Wilson cold yet?"

"He wasn't when I called half an hour ago. But he's sinking fast; they gave him two transfusions and he's in an oxygen tent. He'll be dead for the

morning papers.”

“That will be just dandy. With us not being able to explain why he was being arrested.” Piper picked up his cold cigar, looked at it suspiciously, and laid it down again. “About the only thing we can do is to have the boys on the robbery detail dig up everybody who’s listed as missing stuff lately. Some of them will be able to identify their property from the pile of Wilson’s loot that’s laid out downstairs, and we can toss that to the papers. Maybe one or two of the complainants will be important names, stage or radio people, or somebody out of the social register, which ought to help.”

“Okay, but it won’t mean anything to the afternoons,” Smitty pointed out. He leaned on the desk, lowering his voice. “Here’s a suggestion, sir. Why not get yourself off the hook by going ahead and pinning the Marika killing on Wilson? He’ll never live to stand trial anyway.”

“*What?*”

“After all, he does fit the description. He’s a known criminal, and he was identified by the Fink woman.”

“An identification that was busted wide open a minute later.”

“But do the newspapers or anybody have to know that? The doctor won’t talk, and neither will the boys. And we can button up Mrs. Fink.”

“But we can’t button up Miss Hildegard Withers,” pointed out the Inspector. “Besides, some of the stuff found in Wilson’s flat matches the description of the jewelry taken in the jobs pulled down on Barrow and Minetta the night of the Marika murder. He can’t very well have been in two places at once.” Piper shook his head, almost regretfully. “No, Smitty. What you suggest is unethical, and besides it’s too damn risky.”

“But we wouldn’t actually have to pin the Marika job on him then, we could just say that Banana-Nose was being picked up on suspicion or for questioning in regard to the murder ...”

“Judas Priest no! We can’t risk the suggestion of any connection there. It would all come out sooner or later, and how would it look for the police to shoot a man, even a known burglar, by mistake? But wait a minute. That gives me a sort of idea. If we could just suggest that Wilson was maybe tied up with some other homicide case, something important enough to excuse the big turn-out and his being shot—” Piper nodded. “Only just to be safe it ought to be some case out of mothballs, maybe even one in the Closed file.”

“Yessir,” said Smitty approvingly. “Lieutenant Boylan would approve of that. And it ought to take the heat off.”

“It’ll give us a breathing spell, anyway. And we’ll have to toss them something on the Marika murder at the same time. Too bad we can’t do as we used to in the old days, and give them the song and dance about our investigating a hot lead and an arrest is expected at any minute.”

“But in a way it would be the truth. There’s always Cawthorne, sir.”

The Inspector nodded. “The more I think of it the more I like him. A lunger doesn’t burst out of a hospital and disappear for nothing. If Marika had been sending him money and then suddenly cut it off without warning, he might blow his top. Okay, announce that we are making a nationwide search for David Cawthorne, wanted on suspicion—no, make it wanted for questioning in regard to the Marika job. See if you can’t get hold of a picture, or at least a detailed description of the man from the Phoenix hospital, and alert everybody between there and here to start tracing him.”

“Right away, Inspector.” Then Smitty frowned. “But what if we do get a picture, and find he hasn’t got a big nose after all?”

Piper sighed. “You still don’t get it, do you? The man who killed Marika was somebody she knew, or she wouldn’t have recognized his voice and pressed the button that released the downstairs door. He came there intending to kill her, but he didn’t want to run into anybody who might recognize him later, so he put on the phony rubber nose and glasses as he came in. Outside Marika’s door, of course, he whipped them off again and stuck them in his coat pocket so she’d know him. The one thing we’re sure about is that this murderer *doesn’t* have an oversized schnoz!”

“Yessir,” said Smitty meekly. “Is that all?”

“I guess so. Wait, you better send somebody out for some aspirin.” The Inspector’s headache was not yet the worst in Manhattan or even the worst he had ever suffered, but like a lion’s whelp it showed unmistakable promise of what it was going to be.

Alone at last, he took out the thin file marked “Thoren, Marika” and thumbed through it, then put it aside. From the top drawer of his desk he produced the thick, dog-eared record bearing the name “Harrington, Midge” and forced himself to study it, though he could have repeated it almost word for word from memory. There was no similarity between the two cases that he could see. Different weapons, different types of victims, different everything. The only parallel was one that Hildegard had built up out of guesswork reinforced with moonbeams.



Meanwhile his self-appointed Nemesis was busier, as she herself would have phrased it, than a cow's tail in fly time. Her first port of call that morning had been the New York Public Library at Fifth and 42nd, where she hurried up the steps past the two benign stone lions only to learn when she got inside that since her last visit the back newspaper files had all been moved down to the branch at Twenty-fifth Street, just to make everything more complicated.

However, now that she was here in the fine old building where almost everything in the world of print is stored if you can only find it, she spent an hour looking up references on such disparate items as Herbs, monocotyledonous (exotic, white), Jewelry (necklaces, brummagem), Laughter, Laughing and Laugh (Teut; OE *hlehhan*, cf. Dutch and German *lachen*), and Sound (auditory perceptions of the smaller mammalia), pursuing the latter even through dog-eared, yellowed catalogues under the imprint of His Master's Voice and Edison, making copious notes.

Miss Withers then marched all the way down to Twenty-fifth Street, pausing here and there on the way to do a bit of shopping. She had a brief whirl at Macy's and Gimbel's. Salesgirls, who had catalogued her on sight as the jet-earring and cameo-brooch type, were surprised at her penchant for the more extreme styles in costume jewelry. As she waited for her change she heard one clerk say to the cashier, "Get her! Do you suppose she hoards the things?"

The schoolteacher sniffed as she accepted the heavy package, "No, not hoarding," she whispered mysteriously. "I use them for trading with the natives." Her exit was something of a minor triumph.

Her handbag loaded, Miss Withers proceeded to the branch library, feeling immediately at home. There was the same hush, the same smell, and the same musty little men in overcoats poring over the same home-town papers, but she found a vacant table and immediately plunged into the back copies of the *Times*.

There was absolutely nothing in the Vital Statistics column for April four years ago about Midge Harrington's marriage, on the Monday after Easter or any other day. Disappointed but not surprised, the schoolteacher took time out for a visit to the telephone booth in the hall, finding Natalie Rowan safe at home but jittery as a cat on hot bricks.

"Oh, am I glad it's you!" cried the woman. "And I hope you're calling to say you're packing a bag and coming up to stay with me. Because I just

got another of those phone calls, and this time it *didn't* seem silly—”

But the schoolteacher was not in the mood to hold anybody's hand at the moment. “First things first,” she said crisply. “There's something you can do to help. Now listen carefully ...”

“I get it,” Natalie said finally. “I'm to call every county clerk in Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, Long Island, lower New York and Connecticut to see if they issued a marriage license to Midge Harrington four years ago last April. But—”

“The man's name was probably William something,” continued Miss Withers. “The wedding was on the day after Easter. Get going.”

“Why—why, of course. If you say so. Only I wish Iris were here, she's so capable at that sort of thing.”

“Find Bill's last name, so we can locate him, and I'll wager dollars to doughnuts that we find Iris too. Good luck.” And the schoolteacher hung up.

Returning to the newspaper room, she turned to the more sensational New York dailies and plowed through endless columns of chaff in the form of Broadway gossip. Midge Harrington's name cropped up only once or twice in a blue moon, usually in the sort of slick, contrived “news releases” that editors sometimes wink at for the sake of the accompanying leg art. Most of this had been part of Andy Rowan's campaign, and the schoolteacher had seen much of it in Zotos' scrapbooks.

All in all, Midge had made a rather small splash for such a big girl—until her death. Miss Withers even went through the newspaper stories of the murder and the ensuing trial, learning nothing new. The case had involved money and sex, but it lacked mystery; it had soon disappeared from the front pages.

Andy Rowan had been so obviously guilty, to everyone.

About to leave, the schoolteacher turned back to the earlier volumes again, sticking close to the theatrical pages. Finally she found something that made her perk up her ears—a half-column review by some assistant drama editor. It went:

#### VAUDEVILLE PROVES LIVELY CORPSE

Palace Drops Movie Revivals To Offer Frisky, Girlsome, Funny  
Variety Show

Lilly Morris, beloved English character songstress, and Flip Jayen, glib gagster and master of the barbed squelch, headline the revival of old-fashioned two-a-day at the Palace this week. Miss Morris, of course, is inimitable in her version of “Don’t ’Ave Any More, Mrs. Moore’ ...

“I can imagine,” said Miss Withers, skipping a bit.

... Flip has a new act and a new cigar, both reminiscent of his old ones, but he is a master of timing and the dead-pan red-head against whom he bounces his slapstick has some of the best filled opera-lengths these weary eyes have seen in many a moon ...

“That would be Iris, of course!” observed the schoolteacher, and was glared at by the man at the next table, who was deep in old *Christian Science Monitors*.

... Maxine and her all-girl orchestra. Cawthor the Great, magician, medium and mentalist, pulls rabbit out of ectoplasm and even materializes the ghost of a mermaid named Mary, who performs some eerie and baffling stunts of her own ...

“But I thought all mermaids were named *Minnie*,” Miss Withers said, and was roundly shushed by her neighbor. She ignored him, and went on.

... Nudes Indigo, a dance act featuring three king-sized adorables known as The Three Glamazons in some voluptuous Orientale arrangements, fills in the rest of the show, together with Max and his trained dogs and ...

So Iris had been telling the truth, at least about one thing. She had been on the same variety program with Midge Harrington, who must have been one of the dancers. Yes, on the opposite page was a photo of three girls wearing wispy scarves and seductive smiles—Midge in the middle, clearly recognizable in spite of the make-up.

Miss Withers began to gather up her pencils and notebook, but before she checked in the heavy-bound volumes she took one last look at the pictured face of Andy Rowan, caught in a candid shot in the courtroom. He

looked like a sulky, defiant small boy, she thought. Scared, yes. Guilty, yes. But guilty of what? A man who had been foolish enough to try to dispose of an inconvenient dead body might very well look just like that.

On the whole, she had to admit, the old newspapers had been a let-down. The things one really wanted to know hardly ever got into print anyway, or if they did it was a matter of reading between the lines. Digging in the files was a little like a blind archeologist's sifting the sands of the Sahara for neoliths.

Except that archaeologists had all the time in the world, and Andy Rowan's sands were running out. Only two and a half more days—

She tried the telephone again, but the Rowan number was endlessly busy. Which meant that Natalie was faithfully doing her assigned job. At least, whether anything came of it or not, it would keep the woman busy and occupied.

As her nickel tinkled back into the slot, Miss Withers resisted a sudden impulse to use it to ring up the Inspector, just for old times' sake. "I will not!" she told herself firmly. "No olive branches until he apologizes on bended knee for some of the things he said last night." She hurried out of the library, grabbed a hasty salad and cup of tea in a little lunchroom around the corner and, thus fortified, took off again.

At a little after two o'clock that afternoon she was sighted entering a music store on upper Lexington, a musty labyrinth overflowing with ancient scores, sheet music and arrangements, battered old instruments, and tens of thousands of phonograph records, some of them antique wax cylinders which could only be played on the exhibition in the window.

It was a record collector's paradise, offering everything from early Carusos to under-the-counter Billie Holliday numbers. Miss Withers reveled in such reminders of her happy childhood as *No News, or What Killed the Dog*, *Cohen at the Telephone*, *A Hunt in the Black Forest*, and Bert Williams' immortal *Can't Do Nothing Till Martin Comes*, but departed finally with only one purchase, a thin brittle hard-rubber disk which she carried as cautiously as she would a basket of eggs.

It would be premature, she told herself, to show any optimism yet. Besides, wasn't it D. H. Lawrence who had said that the insane asylums were full of optimists? But her tide had very definitely turned.

That same tide, unfortunately, half an hour later left her high and dry in the first-floor salesroom of Tiffany's—under arrest.

“Her reasoning is full of tricks And butterfly suggestions ...”  
—*Alfred Cochrane*

## 11.

THE INSPECTOR SAT SLUMPED DOWN at his battered oak desk, with a faraway look in his eye. Finally his unwilling visitor got tired of watching him doodling on his memo pad, drawing snakes curled on their own tails and linked like a chain. There was probably some Freudian significance to that, but she didn't know what. “Well, Oscar,” she broke in, “say *something*, even if it's only goodbye!”

More than ever this afternoon Miss Withers looked like a scandalized Buff Orpington hen, her feathers ruffled and a somewhat frantic gleam in her eye. As he still hesitated, she said, “I *demand* to know just why I was brought down here to Headquarters instead of being booked at the police station. I didn't ask for any kid-glove treatment, I didn't even say that I knew you. Besides, I could have beaten the rap, as you call it.”

“Could you now?” Piper asked gently, almost absently.

“Of course. Naturally I never had the slightest intention of stealing their old necklace, I just tested it a little when the salesman's back was turned. But there was a store detective I didn't know was watching me, and he leaped to conclusions. And then when they found all those other fragments of necklaces in my handbag, they thought the very worst.”

“Next time,” the Inspector told her, “don't try to play games in a big Fifth Avenue jeweler's, it's like going into the U.S. Mint with a sack and a pistol. To answer your question, a plainclothesman happened to be outside, watching through the window. His instructions didn't cover a thing like that, but he used his own discretion, heading off the precinct boys and bringing you down here.” He looked at the typed report in front of him. “All in all you seem to have had a busy day.”

“Oscar!” she gasped. “You didn't have me shadowed, you wouldn't dare!”

“Maybe I did it for your own protection,” the Inspector said. “And my own. So I could be prepared if you got ready to pull any more surprises like the one last night.” He shook his head slowly. “Hildegarde, I hate to say

this. But anybody reading this surveillance report would *swear* that you haven't got all your marbles."

She bridled. "I beg your pardon? If you're trying to cast reflections on my sanity, what's so psychopathic about looking things up in the public library?"

"But what things! Books on rare orchids and the theory of sound and how doggies hear and the etymology of laughter."

"All pertinent to the investigation," she said firmly. "I wanted to find out if white orchids were rare enough so there would be any chance at this late date of tracing the man who sent them to Midge Harrington on the day after Easter, which was obviously some sort of anniversary because she cried over them but only wore them to bed. I discovered that they're expensive, but not that rare. A blind alley. Then I started out to try to find something on those queer phone calls that Iris and Natalie and I all received, that crazy jeering laughter. Talley howled when he heard it, which gave me something to start on. I found that dogs' sensitive ears are actually pained when they hear certain sound vibrations inaudible to us. But those higher vibrations aren't usually made by any human throat, Oscar!"

"I see," he said. "Now it's the Case of the Laughing Robot." But he was still far away. The man had something on his mind, giving her only half his attention. "Then," he continued, "you went cruising down Broadway, buying junk necklaces and telling the salesgirls you were going to use them as trade goods for the natives."

"The girl was impertinent, and I got even with her by saying the first fantastic thing that came into my head! I didn't know I was being spied upon!"

"Then you hightailed it over to a branch library, and talked out loud to yourself while you dug in the old newspaper files, right?"

"That's almost slanderous! I was only trying to find out something new about the Harrington girl's background, her career in show business and everything. Perhaps I did exclaim a little once or twice when I ran into something that surprised me—I was concentrating so hard I forgot where I was. It could happen to anybody."

"Nothing that happens to you could happen to *anybody* else," Piper told her. "Then, according to the report, you went up town to a secondhand shop and prowled around the old phonograph records until you found a little number called *The Clock Store*, issued in 1911. You bought it for

\$4.50, started for home, and then changed your mind and took a taxi down to Tiffany's, where you represented yourself as a customer and then tried to wreck a \$30,000 string of matched emeralds."

"I had my reasons, Oscar. 'I am but mad north-north-west.' But it all does sound very deadly the way you put it. Your spies don't miss much, do they? Except perhaps what I had for lunch."

"Chicken salad and tea," he said. "You also made a phone call to a Lackawanna number."

"Yes, to Natalie Rowan. I set her to calling every county clerk within two hundred miles of New York to try and find out the name of the young man Midge Harrington married four and a half years ago, so he could take his rightful place with the other suspects." Miss Withers smiled with modest triumph. "*There's* something you didn't know!"

The Inspector went back to his doodling. "Relax, Hildegard. What do you think the police are, nincompoops? We knew about the marriage the day after the girl was murdered, but it was more than three years in the past. When Midge was hardly more than fifteen she eloped with a college boy to Rock Creek, Maryland, which is a sort of Gretna Green, and went through a ceremony with both of them giving false names and ages. His family found out about it and had it annulled a few days later. Rich Philadelphia people, name of Gresham. The kid was Wilton—no, Wilmot Gresham."

It was a body blow. "But Oscar, there was nothing about him in your file!"

"Why should there be? The boy was only a couple of years older than Midge, and there was no need to drag him and his family into a murder case. He had gone back to school at Princeton after the family made him see the error of his ways, and had kept his promise never to see the girl again. We checked back on him thoroughly without his even knowing it, and he was in his dormitory room studying the night Midge was killed."

"Studying on a hot Friday night in August? Summer school must have changed since my day. These alibis! And did he have an alibi for the Marika murder too?"

Piper rubbed his forehead wearily. "I don't know. You can ask him, I suppose. The fellow graduated in midterm, and now I understand he's got some sort of office-boy job on Wall Street, so presumably he lives here in town."

“Oh dear,” sighed Miss Withers. “You’re right, he doesn’t fit into the Marika job at all. Because he couldn’t have known about the medium, and what she told Mrs. Rowan about a message from the Beyond. And Mr. Zotos gave me such a nice ready-made motive for him, too. For killing Midge, I mean. But I suppose it does help to eliminate suspects, doesn’t it?” She stood up. “I’d better run along and start eliminating some more.”

“Wait!” the Inspector said sharply.

“Now, Oscar, you’re not going to continue this farce of holding me as a prisoner?”

“I want you to have dinner.”

“What would I have at this hour, breakfast?” Then she did a double take. “Oh, you’re not actually inviting me out? What is this, an armistice?”

It was close to unconditional surrender, as the schoolteacher discovered when they were seated at a tiny table in a backyard outdoor restaurant in the Village, staring at each other over plates of *chicken cacciatore*. “You really want to know why I assigned a man to tail you today?” Piper said. “It was because I’m desperate and just about at the end of my rope, that’s why.”

“Oscar!”

He nodded glumly. “I got to thinking about the times in the past when you played a long shot and won. If your hunch about these two murders being connected is right this time too—well, I don’t want that man’s execution on my conscience. Are you getting anywhere? Do you know anything I don’t know?”

“Why, Oscar, you want a peek at my examination paper!”

“That’s about it.” The Inspector took up a bread stick, and gnawed it as if it had been one of his favorite perfectos. “Do you know the answer?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but I’ve learned most of the questions.” She looked at his untouched plate. “Oscar, are you sick?”

“Who wouldn’t be?” He smiled a bitter smile. “Did you see the newspapers?”

Miss Withers admitted that she had been otherwise occupied, and he produced a pocketful of clippings. She read: “1000 POLICE GET THEIR MAN ... Near death in Bellevue City Hospital today lies Rollo (Banana-Nose) Wilson, smalltime sneak-thief wounded last night in biggest police manhunt since the capture of Two-Gun Crowley. Wilson was wanted by Headquarters homicide bureau for questioning in connection with the brutal



strangling of showgirl Midge Harrington thirteen months ago, for which Andrew Rowan, playboy publicist, is slated to pay the extreme penalty next week in Sing Sing's execution chamber ...” She looked up blankly. “But Oscar—?”

“I know,” he interrupted. “It’s all a fantastic mistake. But Wilson *was* shot, and we had to give the press some excuse for it. We couldn’t mention the real reason for his arrest—you proved he was innocent of the Marika murder with your act with the rubber nose last night, and besides it turned out he was pulling a robbery somewhere else at the time. But this morning I had a headache and besides I was getting a riding from the Commish, so I told Smitty to get rid of the reporters by telling them we wanted Banana-Nose in connection with some old murder case out of the files. He swears he didn’t say anything definitely about the Harrington case, but how they’d get wind of it otherwise—”

“It would be odd if they hadn’t, with Rowan making wills and changing insurance beneficiaries and all that,” she pointed out.

“Or maybe you started the rumor that the case was being reopened, running around trying to scare the suspects?” He shrugged. “Well, never mind how it happened, it’s happened. Wilson can’t live more than a few hours at the most. If Rowan is executed, and his will and the rest of it made public, don’t you see what the result is? There’ll be a great hue and cry about the police framing an innocent man and shooting down the one witness who might have saved him!”

“I see your point,” said the schoolteacher, adding sensibly, “but do stop trying to think on an empty stomach, it encourages ulcers.” She picked up the clips again. “Here’s something else!” she cried after a moment. “What’s this about a nationwide search for David Cawthorne? Wasn’t that the man Marika was sending money to?”

He nodded glumly. “Our last hope. But he’s probably changed his name. And we haven’t been able to locate a picture of him.”

Try those old copies of *Billboard* in Marika’s bookcase,” Miss Withers said softly. Or the theatrical booking agencies.”

“Huh?”

She whipped open her handbag, and produced a notebook. “Read this. It’s an extract from a review of a stage show that opened almost two years ago. Midge Harrington was in a dance act, Iris Dunn was straight woman

for a comic on the same bill and that's how the two girls met. But there was another act—"

Piper read the page of notes, and said, "So what?"

"Read it out loud, Oscar."

"'Cawthor the Great materializes the ghost of a mermaid named Mary ...' That's silly, I thought mermaids weren't supposed to have souls or anything."

"You don't get the point! It was only his assistant, silly. But try putting the names together. Doesn't it occur to you that Cawthor the Great might be the stage name of David Cawthorne? And that Marika Thoren sounds very much like Mary Cawthorne? Probably his daughter. Anyway she did some magic and mediumistic stunts in the act, and later when he became ill she set up shop for herself as a medium and fortuneteller. Naturally she'd keep in touch with her acquaintances in show business and that's how Midge Harrington became a client—and told Rowan, who said something to his wife about that wonderful little woman up on Ninety-sixth Street! See how very simple it is?"

The Inspector nodded. "Could be. There goes another suspect. After I get back to my office I'll call off the heat on Cawthorne."

"But why? Men have murdered their own daughters before this."

"Maybe. But she wouldn't have been dancing with her own father."

"She wasn't *dancing* with anybody. I don't care what that man downstairs said, he's probably stone-deaf. Marika was playing hymns as mood music for a séance."

"Then she'd hardly be throwing a séance for the man who taught her the trade. And Cawthorne doesn't fit the rest of it—he was just out of a hospital, and could hardly have gone leaping over those fences in Marika's back yard."

Miss Withers conceded that he had a point. "Those fences get in my way too," she admitted. "But, Oscar. I wouldn't be too hasty about calling off the dragnet. If Cawthorne could be located and brought here in time, he could be very useful to us. He knows all the tricks of the trade, and if he'd only consent to lend his talents to a little ceremony Natalie and I have in mind—"

"No!" Piper almost knocked over his coffee cup. "You're not actually suggesting the corny old routine of a séance, with all the suspects present there in the room where the murder was committed, and a fake

materialization of the victim that's supposed to scare the guilty party into hysterics?"

"Why—why yes," she admitted, with an odd look in her eye.

"Something along that general line."

"You *can't* be serious," the Inspector said. "That idea's as fantastic as the old plan of making the suspects touch the dead body on the theory that its wounds would start bleeding again! Besides, nobody would come."

"They wouldn't dare stay away! And, of course, you could *make* them come ..."

He sighed. "Police powers are limited by law. If I had them dragged there I'd lose my badge."

"Not if you found the murderer. And if you don't you'll probably lose it anyway. Osear, I have a double-barrelled hunch that I—that we can solve both these murders if we can only get the suspects all together in a dark room, on any pretext at all."

"You and your hunches—" he began, and stopped. She smiled at him sweetly. "I have another one—a hunch that as soon as you finish your coffee you're going to get the Governor on the telephone and ask for a reprieve for Andy Rowan!"

"Wrong as usual."

"Oh, Oscar! I thought you'd come holding out the olive branch of peace. Please listen to me. Will you call?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"If you must know, because I already tried it this afternoon, and got turned down! The Governor wasn't in too receptive a mood, it seems that some representative of an insurance company tried to work on him along the same lines earlier today. When it comes to that sort of pressure, little Mr. Big is as independent as a hog on ice. He said no reprieve, no stay of execution even, unless I gave him my word that there was some important new evidence, which there isn't."

"It depends," said the schoolteacher thoughtfully. Then she added, "But you did *try*! Oscar, you're beginning to see the light!"

"I am not!" he snapped, and then corrected, "I mean I still think that Rowan is guilty. But as I said before, I hate to see a weak link in the chain of evidence. I want to play safe."

“Thanks very much for dinner,” said the schoolteacher thoughtfully. “I’m afraid I must be running along. I half-promised to see Natalie Rowan tonight, and she’ll be frantic—”

“She’s not the only one,” cried Oscar Piper. “I don’t know what got into you. You’re usually thrusting unwanted advice on everybody—haven’t you anything to suggest now?”

“You could, of course, back up and start all over again, with an open mind. Try believing Rowan’s amended story of what happened that night, just as an exercise of your intelligence, and see where that gets you.”

The Inspector obviously found that a hard lump to swallow. “Then your only theory is still that Midge Harrington was shaking down Rowan, only she got cold feet and called in some old friend, maybe a former lover, to go along for protection? But her protector had been nursing a grudge for years, and the minute they got inside the empty house strangled the girl, then waited around to knock out Andy and take the money out of his pocket?” Piper shook his head.

“Can you think of a better theory, Oscar?” Miss Withers gathered up her gloves, and adjusted her hat so that it canted improbably to starboard.

“And you insist that the same person killed Midge and Marika too? Then from what you’ve told me you’ve already eliminated all your suspects! Not just the suspects—everybody in the case!”

“Have I, Oscar?” She gave him an odd look. “How?”

The Inspector was very serious. “Okay, take the men. We’ve just talked about Cawthorne, and Banana-Nose Wilson, and Gresham. All out, for various good reasons. Sprott and Bruner are your pet suspects. They may both be short on alibis, but neither of them got that \$5000—the musician couldn’t pay his back union dues for months after the murder, and Bruner got kicked out of his Brooklyn studios for nonpayment of rent. Even Zotos, from what you admit about him, doesn’t seem the type to be able to fight his way out of a wet paper sack. If he couldn’t walk around the block with you and your dog without gasping for breath, then he certainly didn’t bash out Marika’s brains and then leap down the back stairs and vault over those fences ...”

“You have a point,” admitted the schoolteacher. “But—”

“Suppose we pursue your argument to the ridiculous,” Piper continued. “Take the women, though I for one don’t believe that the girl would have turned to her roommate or any other female at a time like that. Iris Dunn

might have been able to climb fences—but where was her motive? Virla Bruner, the ex-wife, had already had her full measure of revenge when she wrote the letter that queered Midge's chances of being Miss America. Natalie Rowan would stop at nothing to save her husband—but she'd have stuck on top of the first fence. Chloris likewise. So you see?"

"I do indeed," Miss Withers told him. "When the impossible is eliminated then whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth. Here are a couple of moot questions for you to answer. First, was there any mark or wound on Andy Rowan when he was arrested?"

"Huh? Why, nothing serious. As I remember there was just a sort of lump on his forehead, probably from bumping the windshield when his car coasted into the back of that truck."

"Or when he got hit with a sap. Second question—why did the two officers who arrested him show sudden signs of prosperity afterwards—new cars, new fur coats for their wives, that sort of thing?"

The schoolteacher took off. Oscar Piper hastily grabbed up the check and followed her toward the door, saying, "Wait a minute! That's a serious charge—"

"But I'm not making any charges," said Miss Withers. "I'm just thinking up questions. That five thousand dollars that both Andy Rowan and his wife admit he had in his pocket the night of the murder is beginning to get in my way, just like the fences in Marika's backyard." As he stopped by the cashier's desk, fumbling for change, she hesitated in the doorway. "Goodnight, Oscar. Don't bother about a taxi, I can grab the subway at Sheridan Square and be home in ten minutes."

She could indeed—but wasn't. Leaving the train at Times Square, the schoolteacher sought out a catchpenny novelty store on 42nd near Sixth that offered amazing bargains in cameras, camping equipment, and all sorts of musical instruments. Portable phonographs, Miss Withers discovered, came in various sizes, and prices, made to play records cut at 78, 45, or 33½ rpm. After quite wearing out the salesman she invested a major share of her remaining cash in an instrument and, thus loaded down, put in a short session in a telephone booth, a longer one in a substation stocked with out-of-town telephone books, and then finally bundled everything into a taxicab and headed home, with blood in her eye.

Iris was still at dinner when the call came in. The Greshams dined late, and dressed for dinner. Which might have been fun, only the evening gowns worn by Bill's mother and aunt and sister ran to sleeves and scarves, and the girl was so acutely conscious of her naked shoulders and the cleavage which remained obvious in spite of her best efforts with a borrowed brooch that she was hardly tasting the overboiled vegetables, the paper-thin slices of ham.

Bill was no help. She hadn't been able to get him alone all day. Something happened to him here in this house, cancelling out his personality. He didn't even smile at the butler, who looked so much like Bill Robinson that Iris always expected him to go into his dance. Now the old colored man was saying, in hushed, apologetic tones, "They's a long distance call from New Yo'k for Miss Dunn."

Iris was watching Bill's face, and at the "Miss Dunn" he had, she thought, the grace to blush.

"My husband," thought Iris. "For better, for worser." Then, as she started to put down her napkin, she heard the old crocodile—correction, she heard her esteemed, though unknowing mother-in-law at the head of the table say, "Tell them she's at dinner, Thomas. Ask them to call another time ..."

"Oh, no, please!" Iris cried, louder than she meant, and ran hurriedly out of the dining room. The telephone was all the way down a long hall, and as she came toward it she promised herself that no matter who this was, no matter what they had to say, she'd tell the Greshams that an emergency, some sudden illness of a rich uncle or something, was calling her away. Immediately. She could pack and make the ten o'clock train to New York ...

Then she remembered that nobody knew she was here, nobody in the world. She was supposed to be hiding out. Her agent didn't know she was here, nor Actors Equity. She picked up the phone under some strange compulsion she could not understand, and it was cold to her fingers. "Y-yes? This is Miss Dunn speaking."

Some operator said, "Here's your party, go ahead." And then it came, just as she had somehow known it would come. The laughter again, the roaring, slow, inhuman laughter from hell!

"Oh, *God* no!" Iris cried. And then it stopped.

“Don’t be alarmed,” came a crisp feminine voice from the other end of the line. “Just *testing*, my dear. Was that the way it sounded when you heard it before?”

“Yon k’n hide de fier, but w’at you gwine do wid de smoke?”

—*Uncle Remus*

## 12.

IT WAS LATE WHEN MISS Withers arrived at the house on Prospect Way, loaded down with an overnight bag, a paper sack containing Talleyrand’s pan and water dish and rubber ball and chocolate-flavored bone, and the inevitable black umbrella and oversized handbag. It had been a considerable wrench for the schoolma’am to tear herself away tonight from her own fireside, her own beckoning bed. But when she had finally phoned Natalie Rowan, hoping to beg off, the woman had been almost frantically insistent.

Of course, the poodle, still of an age when every change in routine presaged adventure, was delirious with joy. He had enjoyed the taxi ride uptown, as usual doing his best to bark simultaneously at every car passing on either side. He liked the new smells of the trees and shrubs on the Rowan lawn, he liked Natalie Rowan when she came cautiously to the door to let them in, and he even liked the burly man in the blue serge suit who sat in the biggest chair in the living room, smoothing his tight gray curls with one hand and holding an especially odorous pipe in the other. The room was blue with smoke.

“Thank heavens, you finally got here,” Natalie exclaimed. “Of course you remember Mr. Huff, Miss Withers?”

“I do indeed.” The schoolteacher acknowledged the introduction somewhat frostily, and was openly unimpressed by the news that the keeper from Sing Sing had stuck around just in hopes of a word with her before he left.

“If I’d known what you were up to last Sunday,” the man said heavily, “I wouldn’t have gave you away. Because any friend of Mrs. Rowan and her husband is a friend of mine.”

“How cozy,” muttered Miss Withers under her breath. Then she got hold of herself, and politely asked after the health and well-being of the prisoner.

“You never saw nothing like it,” Huff told her, without taking the pipe from between his strong yellowish teeth. “I certainly don’t see what keeps



him going, but he shows no signs of cracking.”

“Evidence of a clear conscience, do you suppose?”

“Of course it is,” Natalie put in breathlessly. “Anybody could see that.”

Huff rubbed his jaw. “That, or something else just as good. I’ve seen a lot of them come and go, and Rowan certainly doesn’t act like the others in the condemned row.”

“And do you know the latest?” Natalie Rowan said. “Andy’s writing his autobiography, imagine that!”

The schoolteacher imagined it without too much strain, and remarked that it was possibly a very good thing for the man to have some way to occupy his time. “I wonder if he’s bringing out any new facts in his story?” she added.

“Nobody’s read it,” Huff admitted. “Not even me.”

“But this is the important part,” Natalie continued, her voice high and strained. “Andy’s going to keep right on writing it up to—as long as he’s in that awful place. And he plans to ask the warden himself to do an introduction, and then leave the manuscript to any New York newspaper who will publish it and use the proceeds to establish a fund for the benefit of persons convicted of murder on purely circumstantial evidence!” She gulped. “Not that that will do Andy personally any good.”

“I keep telling Mrs. Rowan,” said the man from Sing Sing, “that she’s got to prepare herself. No harm to keep on hoping, but only about one in fifty who ever gets into the death-house comes out alive.”

“We are dealing, after all, with a man and not just a statistic,” began Miss Withers. Then she saw Natalie Rowan’s face, which was suddenly streaming tears. “Take it easy—” she said.

“I’m sorry! But I just can’t stand any more ...” The woman turned and ran blindly out of the room, upsetting an end table. There was the slam of a bedroom door.

The silence was heavy, and uncomfortable. “You can’t blame her,” said Mr. Huff, as he felt for his highball glass on the floor beside him and carefully emptied it. “Well, I’ll run along. Hope you work something out, because I sort of like the guy.”

Miss Withers saw him to the door. “Just what would be the chances,” she said in a low voice, “of your getting hold of that manuscript of Rowan’s so I could see it?”

“Like I told Mrs. Rowan when she suggested the same thing; no dice, ma’am. A death-house prisoner’s personal property is his. While he lives, that is. Maybe afterward?”

“Afterward would be too late.” The schoolteacher cleared her throat. “If it’s a question of money—”

Huff looked shocked. “Lady, I shouldn’t even be doing this!”

When the door had closed upon him Miss Withers went upstairs and did her best to get Natalie Rowan calmed down, mingling reassurances with hot-water bottles and aspirin and bromides. “I’m sorry I went all to pieces,” Natalie finally whispered. “Right in front of that nice Mr. Huff, too.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” the schoolteacher said.

“But you won’t leave me? You’re staying the night? You’ll sleep right across the hall, so we can hear each other if anything should happen?”

“Nothing is going to happen,” said the schoolteacher. “Now you get to sleep. I’ll straighten up a bit downstairs, and see to the lights and the doors and everything. Talleyrand can stay in the kitchen, and keep an eye on things.”

Natalie nodded sleepily. “Don’t bother to empty the ashtrays,” she murmured. “It’s so nice to see signs of a man around the house—any man.” Then her eyes opened wide. “And if the phone rings, let it ring. It would only be another of those awful things ...”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about those laughing phone calls,” Miss Withers said. “By the way, was the call that came today any different really from the first one?”

“I—I don’t know. It just hit me different, I guess.”

“I think *I* know why,” the schoolteacher told her. “I had in the meantime infected you with the virus of fear. You were susceptible this time, you were prepared to be scared because I had been. That’s what Iris did to me. If I hadn’t been made hypersensitive by her story of the first phone calls I’d probably have hung up on the laughing hyena and thought nothing of it. Would you like your window open?”

“Please,” Natalie said. “But—but who infected Iris, then?”

“Yes,” said the schoolteacher. “But no more of this tonight. We’ve both had what might be described as a hard day.” She turned out the bedside lamp and tiptoed out of the room.

Downstairs in the middle of the room in which Midge Harrington had died Miss Withers stood still for a moment with her eyes closed, trying to

envision the place as it had been that night more than a year ago, with the girl lying strangled in the middle of the Aubusson carpet, and Andy Rowan walking unsuspectingly into the trap—

But it was only a room, full of fumed-oak furniture. She looked up at the portrait of Emil Fogel, the esteemed cotter-pin manufacturer. “If only you could talk!” said Miss Withers. “But you did, didn’t you? Only you should either have kept silent or else said just a little more ...”

He stared back glumly, and the schoolteacher hastened to straighten up the room a little, carrying out glasses. Then in the kitchen she washed up the dishes remaining from Mr. Huff’s supper, which had evidently consisted of potato pancakes and applesauce. Talley begged for and received a cold-remaining pancake, and then bedded down obediently in a corner, looking as though butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. But all the same his mistress tied the refrigerator door shut, and barricaded the swinging door of the kitchen.

“Stay put,” she told the dog. “You may look like an innocent brown lamb, but there’s larceny in your heart.” She checked the locks, turned out the lights, and made her way back upstairs to a fluffy little guest room, where her few Spartan belongings contrasted strangely with the blue and gold forget-me-not motif. There was a floppy French doll propped against the pillows, and Miss Withers firmly dropped it out of sight in the closet. She gave her hair its requisite hundred strokes with the brush, donned her old-fashioned flannel nightgown, and climbed into bed.

It was the first peaceful moment of reflection she had had all day. Now was the time for detached thought, the time to make decisions. Only she went to sleep. It was a deep, dreamless sleep that was like a little death. It might have lasted five minutes or five hours, and then suddenly she was wide-awake again, not daring even to breathe, because something was wrong in the house.

“A noise,” she decided. “It must have been a noise.” It came again, a faintly metallic sound outside in the hall.

“It’s only mice,” Miss Withers reassured herself. Then she stiffened. “What do I mean, *only* mice? I *hate* mice!”

But mice would not be silently, slowly, opening her door. Mice would not tiptoe stealthily into her room. Then a heavy weight descended upon her bed, and the schoolteacher sat up and opened her mouth to scream—only to smell a comforting doggy odor and realize that it was Talley. Leave it to

him to solve the mystery of the barricade at the kitchen door. He had tracked her upstairs like a bloodhound, then patiently twisted the doorknob with his teeth until it opened ...

“Bless your silly safe-cracker’s heart!” she whispered, and hugged his neck. Talley gave her ear a polite lick in the darkness, then turned around five or six times to frighten snakes out of the tall grass and dropped into a compact lump at her feet. There was, in the poodle’s philosophy, a time and a place for everything, and this was the time and place for sleep. Affection could come later, probably around feeding time.

But while Talleyrand had taught himself to open doors, he had never learned to close them behind him. And somehow there was something in this house which made Miss Withers want to shut herself away. She had to crawl out of bed with a chilly draft whistling about her thin ankles, and when she returned she was hopelessly wide-awake. She counted herds of sheep, she counted to a thousand by fives, she counted famous historical murderers whose names began with A, she declined *amo*, *amas*, *amat*, she even counted beads in a string that stretched to infinity ...

The beads suffered change into something rich and strange, a necklace made up of four round stones like tiny fortuneteller’s crystals, then a gem shaped like a coffin, then four more crystals ... But she was tangled in the necklace, and couldn’t get out. She fought and struggled impotently, becoming more ensnared at every turn, until somehow she remembered the *open sesame* that had never failed her yet. “This is only a dream,” she told herself, and woke up instantly. But part of the nightmare went right on happening. The bed was vibrating wildly. It was rather like the minor earthquake she had experienced on her first trip to Southern California, when the San Something fault had slipped a few inches and scared her half out of her wits. But this was no tremblor. “Talley!” she whispered. “Stop wagging your tail in your sleep.” But the dog didn’t stop.

Puzzled, Miss Withers fumbled until she found the switch on the bedside lamp, and then saw with a start that the welcome signs Talley was hanging out were for Natalie Rowan, in silk pajamas and a feathery robe, who was peering in the door.

“It’s only me!” said Natalie. “Oh, were you asleep?”

“Momentarily, yes,” the schoolteacher sighed. “Wasn’t that the general idea?”

“You didn’t hear it, then?”

“Hear what?”

Mrs. Rowan came closer, lowering her voice almost to a whisper. “Somebody was walking around outside the house. There’s a loose flagstone, and it always goes clunk. I could swear—but maybe I only dozed off and dreamed it. If there really had been someone, your dog would have barked, wouldn’t he?”

“Probably not,” Miss Withers admitted. “Unless they happened to step on him in the dark. But relax. If there really had been anyone prowling around outside, they’d have seen this light go on, and probably be blocks away by now.”

“Or maybe they’re downstairs, waiting in the dark—”

“Nonsense. Now he’s awake, Talley would be down there making friends. Besides, how could anybody get in?”

“I—I don’t know. There was that key Andy had made for the Harrington girl ...”

“You haven’t had the lock changed since *then*?” Miss Withers looked thunderstruck.

Natalie shook her head. “Have you a gun?”

“Of course not. And I wouldn’t know what to do with it if I had. But relax. Probably what you heard was only the policeman on the beat—the Inspector must have sent word to the local precinct to keep a sharp look-out and see that we were all right.” Miss Withers crossed her fingers and hoped that heaven would forgive her a lie as white as that one. But all the same it was a good half-hour later, with signs of dawn in the sky, before she finally got Natalie settled down again, with a promise to leave both doors open.

“ ‘To sleep, perchance to dream ...’ ” said the schoolteacher to herself as she wearily climbed back into the unfamiliar bed. But there were no dreams. She slept like a log, even when Talleyrand slipped quietly off the bed and trotted downstairs. When Natalie Rowan came down to make the coffee a little after eight-thirty in the morning she found the big dog in the living room, sitting hopefully before one of the French doors leading out into the garden. The blinds were all drawn, the locks intact—but a square of glass had been deftly cut out of one of the panes of the door and had fallen inside on the rug, unshattered because it had been neatly criss-crossed with scotch tape.

“A very professional job,” admitted Miss Withers when she finally arrived on the scene. A hand could have come in through that opening,

could have reached the latch and then opened the door without making a sound, or at least a sound that human ears could hear. Had Talleyrand heard it? Had the poodle come galumphing down the stairs to see what was up?

“He saved us!” insisted Natalie. “And all the time you were saying he wasn’t any good as a watchdog! Whoever it was, he scared them away and then waited right there in case they came back.”

“Perhaps,” admitted Miss Withers, tenderly ruffling the dog’s fuzzy top-knot. It was possible that an intruder, working outside in the soft glow of a hooded flashlight, might have been frightened away if he had glimpsed the big animal racing silently across the room toward him, even though Talley would only have been trying to be a one-dog committee of welcome.

But as for the poodle’s setting himself up on guard duty afterward, like the apocryphal Dutch boy with his finger in the dike, she had her doubts. A door was a door, and Talley only wanted out.

“Only why,” Natalie Rowan demanded over the breakfast table, “should anyone want to break in *here*?”

“Why should anyone call up on the telephone and blast us with canned, mechanical laughter?” Miss Withers sniffed. “It’s time we had answers to those questions and to a lot of other ones too. Because the clock is running out ...”

She burst into the Inspector’s office before he even had a respectable ash on his after-breakfast cigar. “Oscar, today’s the day!”

“The day for what—my jumping into the East River? Did you happen to see the newspapers this morning? They’re all hinting that the Rowan conviction is open to question, and that if Wilson hadn’t been shot he could tell plenty!”

“Oh, bother the newspapers for the moment. Do you recall our conversation at dinner last night?”

Piper scowled. “Oh, your two questions? I answered the first one then, and now I’ll dispose of the second. For your information, neither of the two cops who arrested Andy Rowan showed any signs of having a dime outside of his regular pay ...”

“Oh, dear!” said the schoolteacher. “But I wasn’t talking about that. Do you remember what I said about getting all the suspects together under one roof and stirring them up in the hope that something would explode?”

“Oh, the phony séance? Well, forget it. It would never have worked anyway. Besides, we’ve located Cawthorne and he isn’t available. He’s in

Reno, Nevada, doing all right at the dice tables as a professional magician should. The reason he left the hospital was that he was about cured and owed a big bill. He also took along a pretty nurse, and married her. Marika wasn't his daughter or his wife—just a cousin, and the money she sent him was payment for the magic act she took over. It seems that they had some kind of a royalty arrangement.”

But the schoolteacher seemed oddly uncrushed by the news. “I wasn't thinking of a *séance* at all,” she informed him lightly. “That was Natalie Rowan's idea originally, but I've been thinking. Oscar, what would happen if you announced to the newspapers that the reason Banana-Nose Wilson was arrested was because you had information that he had been robbing the Rowan house the night of the murder—and had seen Midge Harrington arriving with her murderer? He could have been upstairs, collecting valuables, and seen them from the window. Of course he'd have made a quick getaway down a drainpipe or something, and then kept silent for fear of incriminating himself ...”

“Dream on!” said the Inspector. “Is it opium or hashish?”

“But suppose Natalie Rowan ostensibly identified some of the loot you found in Wilson's flat as her property, missing since the murder? She hadn't reported it before because she was so upset, and naturally she figured that the stuff disappeared during the investigation. That would give you an excuse to bring all the suspects up to the Rowan house tonight, with Banana-Nose Wilson stationed in the upper window to see if he could pick out the one who came there with Midge.”

“How daffy *can* you get?” Piper demanded.

“Of course it would be an act—but if it paid off it would be worth it! And you wouldn't have to have Wilson really there if he can't be moved—it could be one of your men bandaged and in a wheel chair—”

“Sure,” said the Inspector. “Let's play fun and have games. Only for your information, Rollo Wilson turned up his toes during the night, and the newspapers already know it!”

“Oh, dear!” sighed Miss Withers. “But we've simply got to get all of the suspects together somehow ...” She sniffed. “If only you'd cooperate ...”

“I want no part of this,” the Inspector told her.

“ ‘Then I'll do it myself,’ said the little red hen, and she did.” Miss Withers stiffened her spine and marched out of the office.

Although he winced whenever the phone rang or the door opened, Inspector Oscar Piper heard nothing more from the schoolteacher until late that afternoon. He had a feeling, however, that she was up to no good. Conviction came with the last mail of the day. When Miss Withers finally did show up he was still clutching a sheet of paper and talking to himself.

“*You!*” he cried as she approached. “I’ve put up with a lot, but this is the last straw!” He read aloud, in a voice heavy with derision, “*Mrs. Natalie Fogel Rowan requests the pleasure of your company at an informal memorial service for the late Miss Midge Harrington, to be held at nine o’clock on the evening of September 19th at 144 Prospect Way. Motion pictures of Miss Harrington and others will be screened, after which there will be a discussion which it is hoped will result in preventing a gross miscarriage of justice and save an innocent man from execution.*”

“Oscar, perhaps Natalie *did* go a little overboard on the invitations, but —”

“Overboard!” he cried. “Listen. *In return for your courtesy in attending and in evidence of Mrs. Rowan’s sincerity, the other half of the attached will be handed to you at the door.* And here’s half of a hundred-dollar bill clipped to the letter!”

“Natalie Rowan has plenty of money, and she thought this would be one way of making sure that everybody would come. Crude but effective, Oscar. Perhaps it is in somewhat questionable taste, but I don’t see what harm it will do. We’ll need witnesses anyway.”

“You’ll need straitjackets!” exploded the harassed policeman. “This crazy idea—it must be the silly season. Now I’ve seen everything.”

“Not quite everything, Oscar. But I think you will, tomorrow night.”

He was suddenly, dangerously calm. “Sit down, Hildegard. This isn’t like you at all—”

“I’m on a spot,” she said. “Just as you are. Did you know that Rowan has actually made me beneficiary of his insurance? I just dropped in at the company office—I saw the policy and the endorsement. Also the other insurance policies, for the house and Natalie’s jewels. Don’t perk up your ears—there were no necklaces listed.”

“Then why—”

“Why did the company get in touch with the Governor? Because there is a double indemnity clause in his life insurance. I think somebody figured out that if Rowan was executed, and then later found innocent, some smart



lawyer could make a good case for death by accident—even though he had been legally executed!”

The Inspector pressed his fingertips against his temples. “Not so fast,” he said. “What’s this about movies?”

“In a way it’s psychological, Oscar. Mrs. Rowan is going to rent a sound projector and we’ll show the sixteen-millimeter film you took of her husband after his arrest. The killer will be sweating blood, thinking of how close he came to being in that spot. Then I’ve also located some newsreel footage of Midge Harrington in a bathing beauty parade, and the test she made at Paramount when she was trying to get a Hollywood contract. That ought to stir things up even more.”

“Listen,” he said. “If there was a murderer in the room, which there won’t be for sour apples, why in holy blazes do you two crazy women think he’ll crack up and confess just because you show him a lot of old movies?”

“But we don’t, not exactly. The films are being run only to set the atmosphere—and to make it dark.”

“So the murderer can make a break for it, and give himself away?” The Inspector nodded, an idiot grin on his face. “And why should the murderer make a break, you going to have a violinist playing *Hearts and Flowers* offstage?”

“Please, Oscar. You’ll understand it all tomorrow night.”

“Me?” He hit the ceiling, and bounced there. “I wouldn’t show up at your party for all the tea in China!”

“Not even for the hundred-dollar door prize? Then do it for me.”

Almost in desperation he said, “But I tell you again, Rowan is guilty! If he isn’t, I’ll turn in my badge and retire to Long Island and raise ducks, I swear to heaven I will!”

“I *know* who the murderer is,” Miss Withers said softly. “But I’ll have to demonstrate it to make you understand.” She held up her right hand. “You just swore an oath, and I’ll swear one too. If this doesn’t work I promise solemnly never to bother you again. I’ll—I’ll quit snooping and take up fancy needlework!”

The Inspector stared at her. “You really mean that?”

“Word of honor.”

He nodded slowly. “So no matter how this works out, this is the last case we’re ever mixed up in together. Because I’m not kidding either.”

The schoolteacher held out a steady hand, and they shook on it. “Sister,” he said with a hopeful glint in his eye, “you’ve got yourself a deal!”

“ ‘Heavy, heavy hangs over thy head.’ ‘What shall I do to redeem it?’ ”  
—*Children’s game*

## 13.

ALL THE LIGHTS OF THE house on Prospect Way were blazing that Sunday evening when a few minutes before eight-thirty o’clock the Inspector, feeling more than a little foolish, came up the steps. Then, as he stretched out his finger toward the doorbell everything went dark.

Startled, he rang anyway, and a moment later was admitted by Miss Withers, who was wearing her best dotted Swiss and a worried expression. “Oscar, you promised to be here early!” she said accusingly. “I wanted you to help me experiment with the lights.”

“You seem to be doing all right experimenting on your ownsome,” he told her. “What’s the hurry? This clambake doesn’t start until nine, does it?”

“I know. But I’ve been nervous here all alone.”

“You asked for it,” he said unsympathetically. “Pulling a fool stunt like this. Probably nobody will even show up.”

“That’s the very least of my worries,” the schoolteacher confessed. “They’ll all be here. You see, I talked to each one on the phone—and told him that he wasn’t under any suspicion but that I very much wanted him here to help me disclose the real murderer. They all promised, whether from curiosity or because of Natalie’s bribe I don’t know.”

“Yes, where is our fair hostess? I want to give her back this piece of banknote. Of all the weird ideas—”

“For a desperate disease, Oscar, a desperate cure. If it works that’s all that matters. Don’t worry, Natalie will be back in time. She was jittering so much, and casting such longing eyes at the decanter, that I insisted she go out and get some dinner and not come back until time for the guests to arrive. She’s trying to bear up, but, of course, she can’t forget for a minute that this is the last day. Tomorrow is the twentieth—”

“Don’t I know it?” he said, as he followed Miss Withers into the living room and looked at the portable movie projector ready and waiting. “And you’re going to try to prevent the inevitable with a magic-lantern show?”

“If only the magic works!” she told him. “You didn’t forget to bring what you promised, did you?”

“The film of Rowan? No, here it is.” He took a small flat can out of his coat pocket. “Though I still don’t see any method in your madness.”

She sniffed. “Wait and see. Tonight is the culmination of everything. It’s—”

“It’s the beginning of a career in fancy needlework, if you ask me.”

Miss Withers hesitated. “Oscar, about our bargain—”

“Ah—ah!” the Inspector said sharply. “You made your bed, and now you’re stuck with it. No weaseling out, now.”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

He patted her shoulder. “Never mind, it had to come sometime. And I could be wrong, who knows? By the way, since I’m here I might as well make like a policeman and case the joint, just to make sure there aren’t any suspicious characters lurking under the beds or anything. Not that I think anything is going to happen, but while I can keep tabs pretty well on the people in one room, I don’t like to be surprised from behind or anything.”

Piper went up the stairs with professional briskness, leaving Miss Withers to draw the blinds in the living room and otherwise put the finishing touches on the lighting system. For good and sufficient reasons she wanted the room as dark as possible during the showing of the films. There were two floor lamps, four table lights, and the chandelier—like a washbasin on three chains—that threw its glow upward to reflect on the ceiling.

She had already decided where everyone was to sit. Natalie Rowan, who claimed to have had considerable experience with home movies, would operate the projector. The Inspector, at least in the beginning, would be in the chair nearest the entrance, where he could reach the switch that turned off the overhead light. She herself would sit near a table by the French doors, with one lamp within easy reach. The others she unplugged, to prevent any premature disclosures.

Oscar Piper finally came down the stairs again, having evidently satisfied himself that there was nothing on the upper floor except the furniture that belonged there. He was on the lower step when he heard Miss Withers calling softly from the living room. “Oscar! Could you come here a minute?”

“Soon as I answer the door,” he called, above the chiming of the bell. It turned out to be Iris, looking lovely and glowing in a silver-fox jacket and long apple-green gown. At the expression on his face she smiled and said, “Hello, Inspector. Am I maybe overdressed for the party? But you see I’ve got somebody waiting outside in the car, and we’re going places later.”

“Go back and bring him in!” spoke up Miss Withers from the doorway. “It’s Mr. Gresham, I presume?”

The girl nodded, then hesitated. “But I don’t really think Bill would want to—”

“Nonsense, he can stand it if the rest of us can,” Miss Withers told her. “I’d have put him on the invitation list if I’d known he was back here in town with you.”

“He wasn’t,” Iris smiled oddly. “Until a couple of hours ago. He came after me.”

“Miss Dunn has been moving heaven and earth to keep us from finding out that she has been running around with the same young man who was once briefly married to her former roommate,” said Miss Withers. “She had even been more or less hiding out with his family in Philadelphia—”

“But it was supposed to be so they’d learn to like me!” Iris put in. “So we could break the news to them that we got married last Friday, only Bill got cold feet and just said we were engaged—he’s scared pink of his mother. Only now he—”

“All right, all right, run along,” said the schoolteacher. The door slammed. “Oscar,” she said, “will you—”

But the Inspector was puzzled. “How’d she ever meet him?”

“I imagine that when Midge’s things were turned over to her she found some keepsake he’d given the girl during their ill-fated marriage, and used that as an excuse to look him up. But never mind that now, I—”

She bit her lip as the door sounded again. This time it was George Zotos, looking formal and uncomfortable in a tight dark suit and Chesterfield, with a derby in his hand. The little man was out of breath, and moistly apologetic. “I hope you don’t think I came because of the money,” he began. “But if there are films of poor dear Midge that I haven’t seen—”

The Inspector waved him on into the living room, and turned to admit Riff Sprott and Chloris, both of whom turned pale at the sight of him. “I—I didn’t know the police were staging this!” gasped the plump red-head, grasping her husband’s arm defensively.

"I'm not on duty," the Inspector told her. "I just work out as butler on my days off." He heaved a sigh of relief as Natalie Rowan finally arrived, decked out in black satin for the occasion. She had evidently dined on a double brandy or so, but her chin was up and her eyes were bright. Iris Dunn and her young man, closely followed by a pale, suspicious Nils Bruner, were coming in the door, but Piper washed his hands of it all and hastily back-tracked down the hall, where a moment later Miss Withers finally cornered him.

"Oscar, tell me quick," she whispered. "After the murder just how thoroughly was this house searched?"

"Fine-tooth comb," he whispered back. "I was here myself. We didn't miss a thing. Why?"

"You were looking for the murder weapon, the necklace?" Then as he nodded, quite bewildered, she went on swiftly, "Don't look now, but *it's in that chandelier in the living room*—or a necklace just like it."

"What?" he cried.

"Hush, Oscar! I was just checking the bulb to make sure nothing would go wrong at the crucial moment, and there the thing was—four pearls and then a green stone, and so on all around."

"But we looked there!" he said indignantly. "Cops go to the movies too—I saw *The Lost Weekend*."

Catching his arm, Miss Withers said grimly, "Then the murderer brought it here today!"

Piper shook his head. "It seems like a plant to me. You and Natalie didn't cook this up as a last desperate resort to save Andy Rowan, did you?"

She gave him a scornful look.

"Okay, then. But how could anybody get in? There's no signs of forcible entry."

"No?" The schoolteacher smiled oddly. "Did I tell you of the pane of glass Natalie had to have replaced in one of the French doors yesterday? And then, of course, there's the spare key that Rowan had made for Midge Harrington, that's never turned up. The murderer conceivably could have kept it."

The Inspector frowned. "This puts a different complexion on things. If that really is the murder necklace—"

"Please, Oscar! This is my party, don't interfere now! I left the necklace there for a purpose. You sit nearest the door, and after the lights go

out—” She lowered her voice to the faintest shadow of a whisper.

“Oh, there you are!” cried Natalie Rowan, as she came sweeping down along the hall toward them. “Everybody’s here—I mean, won’t you please come in the living room? I don’t know what to say to them, and everybody’s sitting stiff as a board ...”

She had been passing out the remaining halves of the hundred-dollar bills, and seemed surprised and a little hurt that neither the Inspector nor Miss Withers would play that little game.

“It worked with the others,” said Miss Withers softly. “Which is all that matters. Let’s get on with the show.”

They took their places in the living room, in an atmosphere stiff as a poker. Miss Withers sank into the chair nearest the lamp, and Natalie fiddled a bit with the projector and then nodded at the Inspector, who turned out the overhead. Suddenly there was only the abrupt white square of the screen against the farther wall, a screen filled suddenly with brief credit lines that danced away—and then there was Midge Harrington moving across a railed porch, staring soulfully into the night. Like almost all screen tests everywhere, Midge had done the balcony scene from Noel Coward’s *Private Lives*.

Someone in the room caught his breath sharply. No wonder, Miss Withers thought. The Harrington girl had been far lovelier than any of her still photographs had suggested. Unlike so many girls of her extreme height she moved gracefully, lightly, almost fluidly. Nils Bruner must have been a better dancing teacher than he had appeared that day with the ostrich feather fans.

But the schoolteacher dared not pay much attention to what was happening on the screen. She had her ears cocked for the rustle of someone moving; she peered into the pitchy darkness hoping to see the Inspector carrying out his orders. If only he didn’t get engrossed, and forget that he was supposed to change seats, supposed to slip quietly into the empty chair right behind Iris Dunn, and watch her!

Apparently it didn’t matter whether Natalie Rowan had drunk her dinner or not, she handled the projection machine without a hitch—though perhaps the sound was turned up a bit high. On the screen Midge Harrington as Amanda was tossing the bright lines of dialogue back and forth with the glib young actor who had been chosen to give her her cues. “He had to stand on a box in the close shot,” spoke up Iris’ voice suddenly.

Midge had been good, very good. Except, of course, for the faint but unmistakable Brooklyn accent that clung to her. This must be something of an ordeal for any murderer, thought Miss Withers. To look up at that tall, smiling girl and realize that her life had been snuffed out in a few seconds ... in this room ...

The screen test ended, and the film changed abruptly to the borrowed newsreel sequence of a beauty parade at Coney. Midge Harrington came smiling toward the camera, wearing a bathing suit into which she appeared to have been poured. Someone in the darkness sniffed and blew his nose—that must be Georgie-Porgie Zotos in a last tribute.

There was something grimly horrible in seeing the magnificent body of the Harrington girl parading up and down in the blinding sunlight, while the flip breathless voice of the announcer rattled off jokes about her curves, then finally announced that she had topped all the others and not alone in height. Then the screen went blank, and suddenly they were looking at a projected still photograph of Midge in the morgue, with her eyes staring and the grim stigmata around her neck.

“Oh, *stop* it!” somebody cried—it was Chloris. “Turn on the lights!” But her husband must have calmed her, for there was the sound of her leaning back in the chair again.

“Quiet, everybody,” spoke up Miss Withers. “Because I want you all to hear what’s coming next.” They were looking now at a scene down at Centre Street, with Andy Rowan sitting on the edge of a chair and telling a group of policemen his lame and halting story of just why he had been driving a dead girl around the city.

His questioners were all being very gentle with him, a gentleness that lessened a little as Rowan stubbornly refused to make the confession they obviously expected. The Inspector, or at least the back of his head, was in one scene.

Miss Withers wished suddenly that the doughty little Irishman were sitting beside her instead of somewhere off across the room when a moment later she heard a faint tinkle somewhere up overhead. Her eyes were still not enough adjusted to the darkness so that she could see the shadow of a movement—but somebody had softly reached up to take down the necklace.

The schoolteacher could see nothing but the glaring screen, the meaningless repetition of questions and answers, but she knew that



somewhere in the room, somewhere in this same room where Midge Harrington had died, the murderer was moving softly forward ...

It was too much for her. Perhaps it was premature, but she could wait no longer. She reached out for the lamp at her right hand, but somehow it wasn't there. She reached farther but even the table was gone. This was silly—she must have got turned around somehow. She took a deep breath and started to scream for someone to turn on the lights, but suddenly there was a strangling tightness around her throat, cutting off the cry before it had formed. The pressure inexorably increased, and there was a roaring in her ears. The velvety darkness engulfed her so that she could no longer see even the white screen at the other end of the room, so that she could only claw feebly at nothing ...

Now she knew why the necklace had been brought back to the house of murder, placed in readiness for another, a repeat performance. Now that it was too late. She felt a sudden snap—but not—as she had almost expected—the snap of a vertebra. She managed to croak “Help!” in a hoarse strangle, and then the light came on—in the shape of the Inspector’s flash.

Still trying to get her breath, Miss Withers whirled to look behind her, but there was nobody there. She looked at her hands, and was surprised to find that she held an emerald and pearl necklace, torn in two.

Inspector Oscar Piper’s voice cracked as she had never heard it in all their long years of association, quelling the rising commotion before it started. “Keep your seats!” He turned on the overhead lights, then came toward her. “What the—”

“Somebody just tried to kill me,” Miss Withers managed to whisper. “Only the chain broke.”

There was a quick chorus of exclamations, of denials. No one, it seemed, had left his seat.

“All the same,” the schoolteacher insisted, “somebody did try to kill me!”

Natalie Rowan had finally cut off the projection machine, and was staring with wide, frightened eyes. “But who?” she cried.

“Somebody who knew that if there was another murder with the same weapon in the same house, Andrew Rowan would have to be set free!” Miss Withers told her, the snap coming back into her voice. “I mean *you*, Natalie.”

“You’re quite insane!” the woman said. “I haven’t left the machine. Why—”

“The projection machine can run itself quite unattended, and you know it. Look at her hands, Oscar! When I found that necklace a little while ago, hidden up there in the chandelier, I took the precaution of emptying my fountain pen over it. It was booby-trapped, you see.” Miss Withers suddenly pointed. “Look at her hands, I tell you!”

Everyone in the room, even Natalie Rowan herself, was staring at the hands stained bluish-black, the hands the woman whipped suddenly, childishly behind her.

“In revenge and in love woman is more barbarous than man.”  
—*Nietzsche*

## 14.

“IT’S YOUR NECK,” THE Inspector was saying some hours later, as the two old friends sat in the back booth of a little kosher delicatessen on the thoroughfare neither of them had ever learned to call The Avenue of the Americas. “I suppose you have a right to risk it if you want to, but it was a damfool stunt.”

“I only hope someday I’ll get the rest of the ink smears off me,” Miss Withers returned, rubbing at herself with a damp paper napkin. “Before you give me too much credit for bravery, Oscar, I must confess that I had no idea at the time that I was to be the target. I took it for granted that Iris was the chosen victim, as she probably originally was. Natalie must have switched over to me because she thought I was getting too close. And I wasn’t, really, until the last day or so.”

Oscar Piper put down his steaming pastrami sandwich and took a large bite of dill pickle. “Any victim would have done just as well, for her purposes.”

“Do you know, Oscar,” the schoolteacher said suddenly, “this is one time when we’ve *both* been right! So you don’t have to resign and raise ducks and I don’t have to take up needlework.”

“How do you figure that?”

“But isn’t it obvious, Oscar? You maintained all along that Rowan was guilty, and he was. Oh, perhaps he didn’t conspire with his wife to kill Midge Harrington before the act, but he probably helped her at the time and he certainly did his best to dispose of the body and to keep silent from then on. Natalie’s servants up in the country must have had Fridays off instead of the usual Thursday, so there was no one home to notice when she took her car and followed Andy down to town. I believe she mentioned that he criticized her cooking that night, which she would hardly have been doing if the servants were there.”

“I’ll buy that,” the Inspector agreed. “But what an odd weapon for her to choose—a necklace, and a valuable one too.”

“She must have been wearing it, of course. The woman simply used what was handiest. She probably caught them *in flagrante*—maybe she even knocked Andy cold with her slipper or something, though I believe as a rule such wounds are not on the forehead. Of course there never was any \$5000 in the library safe—‘for buying up antiques,’ she said, and there wasn’t a stick of furniture in her house made before 1900!

“I was almost thrown off the track by the fact that no necklace was listed on the insurance policy, and then I realized that she must have bought it in France and smuggled it into the country without paying duty. Anyway, she left Andy to dispose of the body and take the rap, while she scooted home and started calling up the police and hospitals pretending to be looking for him.”

“Say,” put in the Inspector, “I’ve wondered what would happen if two people who commit a murder would actually stick together, trust each other—instead of splitting wide-open as they always do.”

“And it almost worked, Oscar. Andy knew that she would probably be able to save him if she were free, and that they were both doomed if the slightest suspicion fell on her. That’s why she stayed away from the trial, playing the hurt, betrayed wife. But putting up the money, you notice. Then the time began to draw near, and the appeal failed, and something had to be done ...”

“Andy made it clear that something had to be done, by making that trick will. He probably told her about it when she made that one trip to visit him. And from then on he kept needling her in every way he could, changing his beneficiary and letting her know he was writing his biography to be published if he died—” The Inspector grinned. “He had her, and he knew it. They used Huff, of course, as a go-between, and probably paid him plenty.”

“They were smart, Oscar. Smart and lucky. But they made mistakes. Natalie made a mistake when she made up that story about Marika’s wonderful message from her dead first husband to cover her change of heart. Because after she thought it over she realized that it was only a matter of time before I’d be talking to Marika, and the woman would deny that she ever pretended to get such a message. Natalie didn’t think of trying to link the two murders to some imaginary killer then—she just wanted to get rid of Marika fast. You see the *modus operandi*, of course?”

He nodded. “She wore low oxfords and slacks, probably picked up the trenchcoat and man’s hat in a restaurant. With the phony nose and glasses, and her hair tucked inside the hat, she could pass for a man on the stairs. And best of all, for her purposes, she could whip off the nose and stuff it into her pocket, tuck the hat under her coat, and look like herself again by the time she knocked on Marika’s door for the séance appointment. Once inside it was easy—she killed Marika and carefully planted the hat under the body, as a false clue. Only thing I don’t see is how she got over those back fences.”

“She didn’t, Oscar. The woman had terrific nerve. When she heard Mrs. Fink and the others coming up the back way, she simply left the kitchen door wide-open as a blind, unbolted the hall door and went down the front stairs! Trusting that when they found the body they’d be too excited to notice whether the door was locked and bolted, or just locked. Which actually was the case.”

“I can see this will take some more coffee,” the Inspector said. “Waiter!”

“I think it’ll take more sandwiches too,” Miss Withers suggested. “Even though it hurts to swallow. You know what happened from then on, Oscar. I wore myself out trying to pin something on the men Midge Harrington had known, and getting nowhere except to scare them plenty. But the time was drawing short, and Natalie had to go ahead with her original plan of committing another murder, a repeat performance right down to the last detail, to convince you and me and everybody that Andy Rowan was the victim of a frame-up and that the real killer was at large. A homicidal maniac, of course—that’s why she dreamed up the idea of the phone calls.”

“Yeah. But all this about that record you bought—*The Clock Store*, wasn’t it?”

“That was the more popular side, so the man wrote it on the sales slip and your detective found out about it. But the reverse is something just called *The Laughing Record*—years ago it used to make them split their sides and roll around on the horsehair sofa. It was a stunt record, where one man started off in a jolly laugh and eventually others joined in—it was supposed to be so contagious that anyone hearing it had to howl!”

“Those were the days,” said the Inspector. “But why then did it strike you and Iris as something horrible and frightening—right from the depths

of hell, I think you said?”

“She monkeyed with the speed of the turntable,” Miss Withers explained. “The old victrolas, like the one Natalie has in her hall, can be adjusted quite a space either way. I accomplished almost the same thing by slowing and speeding up the record with my thumb when I played it for Iris long-distance. That raises or lowers the pitch, and makes the overtones that dogs howl at, from sheer misery.”

“You always manage to get that silly pup in somehow, don’t you?”

“He’s not so silly! If Talley hadn’t been sleeping on my bed that night, and wakened me, Natalie might have finished the job right there. The missing pane of glass downstairs would have borne out her story of an intruder. And Talley later sitting there by that door—he wanted to go out, but how would he know it led outside unless he had already gone out into the garden through it? He must have squirmed through when Natalie was preparing the scene.”

The Inspector shook his head. “I don’t think she planned to kill you that night. What she wanted all along was the hackneyed old gag of getting all the possible suspects together in a dark room, people who knew Midge Harrington and thus could conceivably have committed both murders—I mean all three, of course. Because you’d been so nice and helpful in working out a theory that fitted right into her plans.”

“I know, Oscar. I fell for it at first, hook, line and sinker. And then I began to dream about necklaces, and finally I made some experiments. Cheap costume jewelry is made of soft metal, and snaps too easily. The murder of Midge Harrington had to be committed with a genuine one, and Natalie Rowan was the only person in the case who might conceivably have owned an expensive thing like that. I proved my point, to myself at least, that afternoon at Tiffany’s when I couldn’t pull theirs apart no matter how hard I tried! Natalie must have kept the necklace in her safe deposit box at the bank—she couldn’t bring herself to get rid of it, of course. She brought it home Friday and hid it in the chandelier, where it would be nice and handy—”

“Wait,” said the Inspector. “If it was the same necklace she used on Midge Harrington, then why did it snap—and probably save your life?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to ask that question,” said the schoolteacher happily. “Do you remember saying a long time ago that there was a weak link or two in the chain of evidence in the Rowan case?”

“Why—yes. But—”

“Well, when I found the necklace hidden up there in the chandelier, I twisted a couple of the gold links part way open—just as a precautionary measure! Before I poured the ink on it, of course.” She smiled. “I’m not always as gullible as I look, Oscar.”

“You are,” he said fervently, “about as gullible as a Scotch pawnbroker.” The Inspector rubbed his hands together. “Yes, I think we can make a murder indictment stick, even if Natalie doesn’t talk. But she will, she’s a woman.”

“Oscar, has the Governor really granted a stay of execution for Rowan?”

He nodded. “They may hold him until after Natalie’s trial. I wouldn’t be surprised if they built a special electric love seat for them both up in the execution chamber and knocked them off in a double ceremony.”

Miss Hildegard Withers, gingerly feeling of her tender throat, said that would be perfectly all right with her.

Turn the page to continue reading from the Hildegarde Withers Mysteries

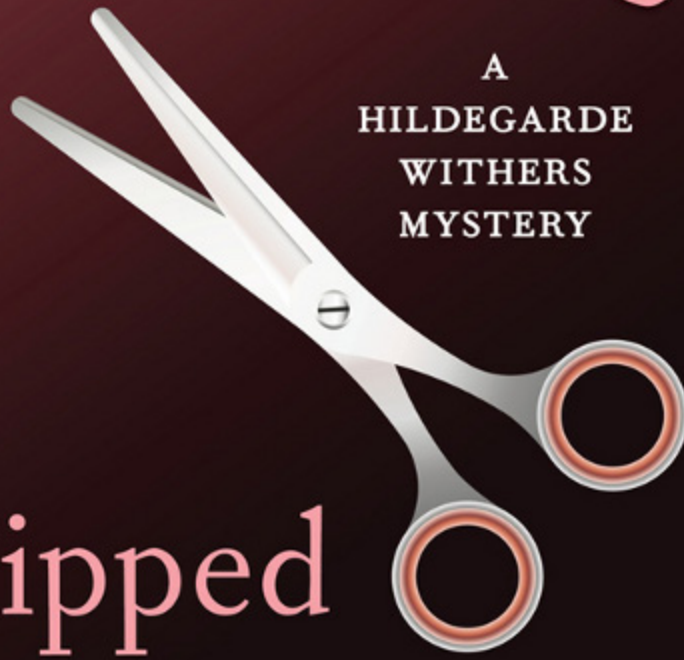


A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK



# STUART PALMER

A  
HILDEGARDE  
WITHERS  
MYSTERY



Nipped  
*in the* Bud



# CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Ina Kell.** A pretty little redhead from the sticks, newly arrived in Manhattan.

**Inspector Oscar Piper.** A short, capable, cigar-smoking police detective.

**Hildegarde Withers.** An angular, inquisitive retired schoolteacher who's both the light of Oscar's life and the bane of his existence.

**Winston H. "Junior" Gault.** The playboy vice president of Gault Foods, on trial for murder.

**Tony Fagan.** An outspoken television personality who didn't live to regret his intemperate ribbing of his show's sponsor, Junior Gault.

**Dallas Trempleau.** A socialite, as blue-blooded as she is beautiful, who's engaged to Junior.

**Art Wingfield.** An up-and-coming young television producer.

**Thallie Gordon.** A bosomy singer who appears on Tony Fagan's show. She and Art Wingfield are an item.

**Ruth Fagan.** Tony's most recent ex-wife, who was also once married to Wingfield.

**John Hardesty.** An assistant district attorney and Oscar Piper's friend.

**Sam Bordin,** aka Sascha Bordin. A crafty lawyer and former pupil of Hildy's.

**Gracie.** Sam's secretary.

**Vito.** An enterprising street urchin who becomes Hildy's unofficial assistant.

**Nikki Braggioli.** A scheming young actor, half-Italian and half-English.

**Ramón Julio Guzman y Villalobos.** A Mexican private eye and lawyer.

**Crystal Joris.** A 300-pound tap dancer.

**Talleyrand.** An independent-minded apricot poodle, the apple of Hildy's eye.

Plus assorted cops, bureaucrats, relatives, clerks, and passersby.

*“From ghoulies and ghosties  
And long-leggitted beasties  
And things that go Boomp in the night  
Oh Lord deliver us!”*

*—Old Scottish Book of Common Prayer*

# 1

THE NOISES WERE UGLY and a little unreal, like sound effects left over from a nightmare. Only Ina knew she hadn't been sleeping. She had been too highly charged with the wonder of it all to close an eye, because tomorrow—if it ever dawned—would be her first day in the city, the beginning of a new life all in glorious Technicolor.

She had been lying awake hour after hour, listening to the night symphony of Manhattan and from each chord weaving dreams in which a certain little girl with fire-blond hair played the starring role. Every foghorn on the Hudson or the East River was from a luxury liner taking her to Capri or the Bahamas; every siren was clearing the way for a squad car full of personable young policemen coming to rescue her from some vague but deliciously shuddery doom; the planes that roared overhead to and from La Guardia were bearing her to Casablanca or Carcassonne. Even the rattle of the milkman's cart and the tinkle of his bottles lent themselves to the game, for Ina saw herself and a Gregory Peckish young man in white tie and tails sitting on the rear step of that homely vehicle, singing “Shall I Wasting?” and “Mavourneen” and the rest, and splitting a quart of homogenized Grade A as an antidote against hangovers. So had passed the night, the happiest of her life.

Left behind forever was Bourdon, Pennsylvania (1950 pop. 3,495) where nothing ever happened except the biweekly change of program at the Bijou. Ina had come to the greatest, noisiest, cruelest, dirtiest, most generous city on earth to seek her fortune, equipped with a reasonably nice face and figure and quite exceptional hair and skin, some sixty dollars in cash, and no training or experience of any sort; but still filled with the firm

conviction that she was a very unusual girl destined for a wonderful and exciting future, starting now.

The hand of her watch had crawled past six, though there was still no sign of dawn at the east windows. She had been lying there in the strange bed in the borrowed one-room apartment, loving the night and loving the city as she never could again. At the moment all Manhattan, down to the last sooty snowflake, belonged to her by a sort of divine right. Above her the heavy future hung like a rain cloud over the desert, like ripe purple fruit ready to be plucked.

“Just let things happen to me!” Ina prayed to her own special deity. “Anything at all as long as it’s different and exciting and soon!”

At the same time something warned her that if she intended making the proper impression on the men who interviewed models and showgirls and mannequins and perhaps (heaven forbid) even secretaries and receptionists, she really ought to be getting some sleep. Only maybe dark shadows around her eyes would be intriguing. Girls weren’t supposed to look too innocent these days, even if they were. Oh, she thought, to be like the wise, dreamy minxes in the Marie Laurencin paintings she had seen reproduced in the art magazines back in the Bourdon Carnegie Free Library; those girls so faintly but definitely dissolute!

They looked as if they wouldn’t be surprised at anything. They wouldn’t have popped up in bed like a jack-in-the-box at hearing strange muffled noises in the night. The sounds must be coming, Ina decided suddenly, from the next apartment, where a late party had been going on until a couple of hours ago. She had eavesdropped shamelessly, straining her ears in an attempt to catch the words of the tantalizing songs they were singing, the point of the long involved jokes they told. All she had been sure of was that they sang, and laughed. Finally they had broken it up and gone home, with much slamming of doors and many loud farewells. But that party *couldn’t* be reviving itself, not now.

Then she realized what she was hearing. It was almost too simple. Men were fighting there, on the other side of the wall—at a quarter past six of a winter morning!

Perhaps Ina was the only one in the entire apartment house to hear the battle, though it is fairly certain that any seasoned New Yorker, wakened in the night by noises up to and perhaps including the Last Trump, would only

have turned over and gone back to sleep. Not Ina. Wild horses could not have kept her a moment longer in bed.

She smiled in the darkness, wondering just how wild horses could possibly keep anybody anywhere. Slipping out of the warm covers, a slim white naked virginal ghost, she found her old wool bathrobe. Then she pattered barefoot across the room, holding out her arms so she wouldn't stub a toe on the television set or on Crystal's little spinet piano, and finally made the hall door without mishap. With an ear pressed to the panel she could hear that the fight was still going on.

Dry smack of hard fists on soft flesh.... Feet stamping like the hoofs of rutting stags.... Wordless exclamations, smothered gaspings for breath. Once a male voice blurted out a name coupled to a black obscenity. Whoever they were, they weren't fooling.

Ina was trembling now, and not with cold. But she softly turned the knob. Just as the latch clicked there was a muffled crash, louder than anything before, and then silence as thick as cold molasses.

With one eye against the tiny crack in the door she waited, filled with an unreasoning impatience. She shivered there for what seemed an hour, and was never able later to swear whether it was really only a few minutes, or ten, or thirty. But she never took her eyes from the door at the end of the hallway, and at long, long last it opened and a man came out.

He was a stocky, youngish man in rumpled dinner clothes—what Ina called a *tuck*—hatless, and carrying a dark overcoat. His face was paper-white, his dark hair plastered across his damp forehead, and his bow tie was loose. He looked utterly spent, breathing heavily through swollen lips, his eyes blank and unseeing. Indeed, he almost threw his exit into low comedy by stumbling over the milk bottles outside the door.

As he came forward Ina saw that his right fist was jammed into his coat pocket; his left held a gold lighter, its flame inches from the cigarette dangling from his mouth. He went past and on down the hall, walking like a zombie, limping a little. Like Lord Byron, Ina thought. His face was something like the engravings of Byron, too—handsome, arrogant, demon-haunted. It was only as he reached the elevator at the other end of the hall that he succeeded in setting fire to his cigarette, and then he absently tossed the lighter into an urn filled with sand, as if the golden toy had been only a burnt match. Then the door of the automatic elevator slammed shut behind him. Curtain.

Excited and disappointed at the same time, Ina closed the door. But this couldn't be all. Maybe he would come back. Maybe ...

Pausing before the bathroom mirror, she decided that the tiny red spot on her nose wasn't going to be a pimple after all. And a good thing the fascinating young man hadn't turned and seen her peeking around the door, with her hair this way. She came back into the room again, surprised to find that she was listening so hard that her ears ached, listening for something she'd heard ... or almost heard. Were there sounds outside, sounds anywhere? Even the city seemed suddenly muted.

And especially was everything quiet in the next apartment. The other man in the fight should have been up and around, ministering to his cuts and bruises, pouring a comforting drink or straightening up the wreckage.

Then she suddenly remembered. The man she had seen leaving *hadn't* shut the door behind him, or she would have heard the click. It must be—it was!—ajar. Ina started impulsively out into the hall just as she was, and then almost too late remembered to stop and release the lock so that she wouldn't be trapped out in the open with no retreat. A few steps and she was just outside that other door. No light showed inside. "Hello?" Ina said softly.

There was the ghost of a sound somewhere inside. It could have been a groan or a snore, the rustle of a Venetian blind in the morning breeze or an inner door softly closing. She touched the panel, which swung easily inward, and a fan of yellow light from behind her began to widen across a formal foyer, across a scuffed and rumpled rug. She saw the slipper first, and then a man's leg.

"Excuse me, but is anything wrong?" Ina waited a moment and then pushed the door hard, and then the hall light blazed in on the body of a man wearing cerise pajama pants. The upturned face was not recognizable, even though she had seen it a hundred times in her own stepfather's living room back home. Blood and bruises had altered it, smeared it inhumanly.

Ina didn't move. She knew she had to do something, but what? She was missing her cue. Here she was forced into the role of heroine, standing before the footlights in front of a waiting, if yet invisible audience, not knowing what the tragedy was about or what lines she ought to be improvising. She was caught like a fly in amber, stiff with stage fright, unable to take her eyes from the thing smashed against the wall. It was a

bloody atrocity, crying mutely to have its limbs decently composed, to be covered up....

Any minute now there would be policemen swarming all over; the cold white light of publicity would expose her. In this bathrobe, and her hair ...

Ina sighed. As she slowly went forward to bend over the crumpled man in the corner she had a clear preview of herself on the witness stand, wearing a demure black suit and her sheerest nylons. The prosecutor was roaring, "Miss Kell, you have testified that you knew the man was dead! How did you *know* that?"

"Because I forced myself to touch him—this artery right here on the throat—and there was no sign of a pulse!"

There was a little ripple of applause from the spectators in the courtroom, among whom were talent scouts from MGM, Fox, and NBC-TV.



*“Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?”*

—WILLIAM MORRIS

## 2

IT HAD BEEN A deceptively quiet afternoon, as afternoons at Centre Street go. Only ten minutes more and Inspector Oscar Piper would have closed up his office and taken off for greener pastures. Then to his unbelieving ears there came the sound of scrabbling paws in the outer room, and through his doorway there descended an avalanche of dog.

“Judas priest almighty! Get down, you damn silly beast!” But the inspector, even as he fended off the big poodle’s attempts to lick his face, was flattered at being remembered after all these months. As might have been expected, the dog’s mistress was not far behind—a weather-beaten spinster armed with a black umbrella, who had the general appearance of having dressed hastily in an upper berth.

“Oscar!” she cried. “As I live and breathe!”

Speaking of breathing, he thought, the poor old girl still wheezed a bit. And for all its sun tan, her face seemed thin and tired. “Well, Hildegard,” he said heartily. “So California’s finally lost its charms, eh? About time.”

“Not at all,” Miss Withers told him, as she settled into a chair like a nesting Buff-Orpington. “California is a good place to vegetate. The climate is mild, and my asthma is much improved. Probably it was only caused in the first place by an allergy to those awful stogies you chain-smoke from dawn until midnight.”

“This happens to be a clear-Havana *puro-puro* out of the box you sent me for Christmas,” the inspector protested mildly. But he put it out.

“Anyway, it’s good to have you back. I’ll confess that in a way I’ve sort of missed—”

“Why, Oscar!” she bridled.

“—missed that hat,” he concluded wickedly.

“But I’ll have you know it’s a brand-new one, from Bullock’s-Westwood!”

“No! I’d have sworn you borrowed it from the Smithsonian. It looks like all the others you used to wear, only more so.” He grinned. “Okay,

okay. Why didn't you let me know you were coming? I'd have met you."

"More probably you'd have mislaid my wire and left me stood up in Grand Central. But thanks anyway for the gallant thought." She surveyed him critically. "You need a haircut, Oscar. And you look a bit peaked. Overworking?"

"Nothing special. The homicide index is up a few points, as it usually is when temperature and humidity get in the eighties. But most of the stuff is routine, and can be taken care of at precinct level. Today's been dull—I was just about to shut up shop." The inspector stole a quick glance at his watch.

"But I am keeping you from an appointment or something?" Then Miss Withers snapped her fingers. "Of course, I'd forgotten. This is Thursday, and you're planning an evening of bowling and a few hands of stuss with your raffish cronies; now, don't try to deny it."

"The Third Avenue Schooner and Pastrami Club," he told her, "has a rather distinguished membership—aldermen, attorneys, doctors and civic leaders."

"I can imagine. But you just run along and be distinguished, then. Don't mind me. I'll be here a week or more, and there'll be other times for us to meet."

"Yes, but I can just as well—" Suddenly Piper's jaw dropped, and he did a broad doubletake. "A *week* or more? You're not actually going back out West?"

She nodded. "I just returned to close up my apartment and sell my furniture, all but the walnut table and some books and things I'm having shipped."

"But—" he said incredulously. "But—but—"

"Stop making noises like an outboard motor, Oscar, and listen. As Emerson once said, 'It is time to be old, to take in sail.'"

"Why can't you furl your sails right here in civilization?"

Miss Withers sniffed eloquently. "Like most New Yorkers, Oscar, you make the mistake of thinking that everything west of the Hudson is a howling wilderness."

"That description," he told her firmly, "fits Los Angeles like a glove! And you could never be happy away from the bright lights of the big town."

"No, Oscar, New York is for the young. It's for people who are still fighting. It's a beehive, with no place for a retired old drone like me."

With admirable restraint the inspector refrained from telling her some of the facts of life about drones and beehives. For many years his secret fondness for this courageous, preposterous old biddy had grown and deepened, and it cut him to the quick to hear this new note of defeat in her voice. Of course, retirement often did that to people. He fiddled absently with some reports on his desk and then said very casually, "By the way, there's a couple of interesting new cases in the open file."

"Two blockheads to kill and be killed," quoted Miss Withers. "Murders aren't what they used to be, and neither is anything else. Come, Talley." She caught the end of the leash and dragged the big apricot-colored poodle away from the office wastebasket, where he had been foraging for scraps of the inspectorial lunch. Then, almost in the doorway, she paused. "By the way, Oscar, do you know what tomorrow is?"

"Friday," he said blankly. "All day."

"Friday, *and* the sixteenth of August." She waited expectantly.

"Let me see. Can't be your birthday, because you stopped having those years ago. Say, is it the anniversary of the day we *didn't* get married?"

"It is not. I jilted you in the autumn, as you well remember. Tomorrow happens to be the day set for the opening of a certain murder trial, I believe in the Court of General Sessions. Can you fix me up with a ticket of admission?"

"Trial? What trial?"

"A young man named Winston H. Gault, for the murder of Tony Fagan, so-called radio and television comic. Your memory, Oscar ..."

"Sure, sure! Junior Gault, the radio sponsor who got tired of being ribbed on his own program and did something about it with a blunt instrument." Piper sat up straight. "How come you're so interested?"

"It's a very *mild* interest, Oscar. You wrote me about the case at the time, and even sent me some laudatory press clippings. I gathered you handled the investigation personally, and that it was one of your major triumphs?"

The inspector nodded, almost complacently. "I knew from the first moment that Gault was guilty. His alibi didn't stand up for ten minutes, and almost as soon as we arrested him he made a confession. No rubber-hose stuff either, so don't go getting any ideas."

"Relax, Oscar. I have no intention of trying to upset any applecarts; my days of sleuthing are over. And if it's too much trouble getting me admitted

to the courtroom, no matter. I can while away my lonely hours here in town by going up to the American Museum of Natural History and studying their sea shells. Since I've been out in California I've become something of an amateur conchologist, you know." She reached into her handbag and produced visual evidence. "Here is a Hairy Triton I found at Malibu, unusually well-marked. This is a Ravenal's Scallop, and the spotted one is a Junonia."

"Snail shells, yet!" muttered Oscar Piper, with ill-concealed distaste. Something had to be done for poor old Hildegarde, and soon. If he could only keep aflame this one feeble flicker of interest in her old-time pursuits.... He reached for the telephone and dialed a number. "John Hardesty, please. Piper, Headquarters. Hello, who's this? ... What? You people keep banker's hours, don't you? Where's John, out getting warmed up for the big court job tomorrow? ... What?" He listened for a moment, said "Judas!" and hung up. "No dice, Hildegarde."

"Oh, dear. No seats left?"

"No trial. That was one of the other assistant D.A.'s. He says that Hardesty is going to get up in court tomorrow and ask for a postponement."

"But why?"

"The fellow either didn't know or couldn't tell me over the phone."

"Oscar, is it true that Sam Bordin is the defense attorney?"

Piper nodded. "With all the Gault dough, Junior would only hire the best. Further proof that he's guilty, as if we needed any. Innocent men don't retain Bordin, a legal magician who's a combination of Darrow and Steuer ..."

"With a dash of John J. Malone, who never lost a client either?"

"You've heard of him, then. Yeah." Piper sighed. "The trial can be set back on the docket for thirty or maybe sixty days, but Bordin will be hoping to get a nol-pros. Somebody's slipped up somewhere." He shook his head, scowling.

"Well, Oscar," said Miss Withers, shrugging, "let me know sometime how it all comes out." She edged toward the door again. "And do give me a ring when you're not so tied up. I'll be at the Barbizon."

"Sure, sure," said Oscar Piper. "Just for my own satisfaction I'd like to get the lowdown on this new development. Hardesty will probably be dropping in at the club tonight as usual, and I'll twist his arm."

But Miss Withers and the poodle were gone. The inspector gnawed on his cold cigar for a moment, then cleared his desk by shoving all the official papers helter-skelter into a top drawer. In three minutes he was on an uptown subway.

“Botheration!” remarked Miss Hildegard Withers somewhat later that evening. She had just lowered her angular frame into a steaming tub, and of course there was no surer way on earth to make a telephone ring. Swathed in an insufficient towel, she made her moist and dripping way out into the little hotel bedroom, stepped over Talleyrand, picked up the offending instrument and said wearily, “Yes, Oscar?”

“How’d you know it was me?” was the blank response.

“I,” she corrected absently. “Perhaps it was ESP and perhaps it was just that you’re the only person in town who knows where I’m staying.”

“Okay, okay.” His voice was jumping. “Had dinner yet?”

“Why, I was just going to order up a tray ...”

“Don’t. Hell’s a-popping. How about meeting me and John Hardesty somewhere for a bowl of soup?”

“But, Oscar, I’m tired from the trip, and ...”

“This is right up your alley, and we really need your help. That poor girl ... But I can’t tell you any more over the phone.”

Curiosity had always been her besetting sin, and Miss Withers hesitated only a maidenly moment before she said, “Very well. But after months of Los Angeles cooking you’re very much mistaken if you think I’ll settle for anything less than duckling *bigarade* at La Parisienne or perhaps sauerbraten at the Blue Ribbon.”

“Anything!” conceded the inspector. “A car will pick you up in ten minutes.”

So it was that theater-bound Manhattanites that evening were amused by the spectacle of a large and whimsically-plucked French poodle, with a bit of green hair ribbon in his topknot, sitting regally enthroned beside the uniformed driver of a police limousine illegally parked half a block off Times Square. Talleyrand was not in the least bored with the long wait. He listened with interest to the radio as it droned forth interminable lists of the license numbers of stolen cars; he shared with polite enthusiasm the lunch of the embarrassed policeman beside him; hamburgers, onion, pickle and all. Talley was a dog who took things as they came, especially food.

Inside the pleasant old *Bierstube* the dog's mistress had been slowly paying less and less attention to her excellent sweet-and-sour pot roast while she listened to the official tale of woe. "You see, Hildegarde," the inspector was saying earnestly, "it's a matter of my personal pride. They're always saying around town that a rich man can get away with anything, even murder. If Gault goes free the wise-guys will nod and wink and whisper that the fix was on. He's simply got to be tried and found guilty and take his punishment, or the law and the department and my whole career are just so much dust and ashes. Isn't that so, John?" His voice trembling faintly, Oscar Piper busied himself with his bratwurst.

"That's—that's right," John Hardesty agreed, swallowing. He had turned out to be a tall, snub-nosed man in his thirties with unruly hair and large hands, who looked somewhat like a prosperous farmer. "Now, none of what I'm going to tell you must go any farther," was his cautious beginning.

Miss Withers tossed her head indignantly. "The inspector here will bear witness that when necessary I can be twice as silent as the grave."

Oscar Piper choked suddenly on a bit of sausage, but Hardesty was already outlining the highlights in the Fagan murder, on the surface at least a black-and-white, open-and-shut case if there ever was one. It seemed that at eight-thirty on the evening of December 17 last, Tony Fagan had started his eleventh weekly video program for Gault Foods. While on the air he had said certain unkind things about his sponsors under the thin guise of humor, the barbs particularly aimed at Winston H. Gault, Jr.

The same evening a little after midnight, Fagan had run into Gault sitting alone at a table in a well-known night club, and had gone over to apologize. Gault had refused to accept the apology and had said something indicating an intention to assault Fagan, but as the younger man was rising from his chair and off-balance, the comedian had swung first and lucky-punched him colder than Kelsey.

Fagan had then left for his apartment at the Graymar, on East Fifty-fifth, where he was later joined by some friends and business associates, including his divorced wife Ruth, the party breaking up around four. A little after six in the morning Gault had shown up and, when Fagan made the mistake of answering his door, had given him a severe beating and then smashed his skull with something heavy—possibly a blackjack. Or it might have been a vase or a piece of bric-a-brac from the apartment, which was as

crowded as a museum. With Fagan dead, there was no way to check whether or not anything was missing.

“No fingerprints,” put in Piper. “But everybody knows about them nowadays. And Gault had plenty of time to clean up his traces afterwards.”

Hardesty nodded, and went on to say that Junior had then walked home to his bachelor apartment on Park and had given the night elevator man fifty dollars to say—if anyone asked—that he’d come home about two. When arrested next morning just before noon he had said, “Then I really did go kill the bastard—I thought it was only a bad dream. Well, he had it coming ...” or words to that effect.

“If you can prove all that—” Miss Withers nodded thoughtfully—“I don’t see what the prosecution has to worry about. Why postpone the trial?”

“When you go up against a smooth defense lawyer like Sam Bordin,” the assistant D.A. explained patiently, “you’ve got to have something more than just motive and circumstantial evidence. You need witnesses.” He rubbed his high forehead, imparting still more disorder to his hair. “There were three important witnesses against Gault, like the three legs of a milking stool. Our case rested on them. First was Ernest Pugh, the waiter at the Stork Club who saw the one-punch battle—”

“But Pugh happens to be a lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserve, and got called back to active duty six weeks ago,” the inspector put in. “Now he’s on the U.S. *Boxer*; somewhere in the Pacific.”

“Second leg,” Hardesty went on, “was the taxi driver, Maxfield Berg, who picked Gault up outside an after-hours bottle club on Second Avenue around six that morning and drove him to Fagan’s apartment house. Berg swore that his passenger was crazy drunk; that the young man told him to wait, he’d just got to run upstairs a minute and beat somebody’s brains out. Hearsay evidence, but valuable since it shows intent, and thus is properly part of the *res gestae* ...”

“Only it was discovered that Berg had spent time in a mental hospital a few years back,” Piper said. “You can’t put a former schizophrenic on the witness stand; Sam Bordin would tear his testimony to shreds.”

The schoolteacher looked puzzled. “But if you have their sworn statements ...?”

The two men exchanged a knowing fraternal smile. “Of course,” Hardesty went on wearily, “depositions, and also any testimony given at the hearing or before the grand jury, are admissible. But they don’t carry much

weight even when they are read into the record. Juries always have a feeling that if the prosecution has witnesses they should be right there in court, so that the defense can cross-examine.”

“I see.” The schoolteacher nodded, frowning. “But what about the third witness? Perhaps a milking stool should have three legs, but from my girlhood days out in the Middle West I seem to remember some stools with only one.”

“Sure,” said Hardesty bitterly. “The third and most important witness of all was one Ina Kell, a little country cousin camping out in the next apartment who heard the fight, peeked out into the hall and saw Gault sneaking away after the murder, and then who went on in and discovered the body. Only ...”

“Only what?” demanded Miss Withers. “You don’t mean that something’s happened to her? She’s not—?”

“Disappeared,” Hardesty said flatly. “Like a soap bubble. Now you see it shining and floating, and then—pouf!”

“Well!” said the schoolteacher, in a tone that Oscar Piper had not heard her use in a long time. “A fine kettle of fish! So a brutal, ruthless killer is going to get away with it because you men hadn’t sense enough to keep an eye on an important witness. Why, she may even be dead!”

“I thought of that,” nodded the inspector solemnly, avoiding Hardesty’s eye.

“More details,” demanded Miss Withers after a moment’s deep thought. “And more coffee.”



“... *There ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand*  
...”

—*I Kings*

### 3

“I KNEW YOU'D BE interested,” the inspector was saying. He took the perfecto out of his mouth and smiled wryly. “I was telling John here earlier about the Bascom case and how you set out to solve the disappearance of three thousand women all at once.”

“And ended up by disappearing myself?” Miss Withers sniffed modestly. “But never mind the good old days just at the moment. Do go on. If you want me to try to help find Miss Ina Kell, I'll have to know more about her than just the fact she reported finding Fagan's dead body.”

“That's just the point,” Hardesty put in. “She *didn't*.”

“But you said—”

“Inspector, you take it from here, will you?” The lawyer gestured. “After all, you were on the scene and everything.”

“Okay,” said Oscar Piper. “It was the boy on that paper route on Fifty-fifth who phoned in and reported that he had just discovered a dead body while in the act of leaving the usual copy of the *Herald Tribune* outside the door of Fagan's apartment. The door had been left open, so naturally he peeked in. Our radio car got there in a few minutes, the precinct men soon after, but I was called over on account of the victim being a sort of public character. The body was a mess of blood and brains, but I learned that it had been found partly covered by a Persian rug. Right away I concluded that somebody else must have found it *before* the paper boy—presumably a woman.”

“Mercy,” said Miss Withers. “I've seen several corpses in my time, but I never had the slightest impulse to throw rugs over them.”

“A certain type of woman,” the inspector explained, “always wants to cover up horrible things, to get them out of sight. Of course, when the rest of Fagan's apartment was searched and Ruth Fagan, the ex-wife, was found asleep in a back bedroom, we figured it was her. Only she claimed that she

had just had too much to drink at the party, had wandered off alone and fallen into a deep sleep.”

“A likely story!” Miss Withers decided.

“But it stood up. We found that Ruth Fagan had never wanted to go to Reno in the first place. She still loved her husband and hoped to get him back someday; carried his picture around in her handbag and saw all his video programs. Besides, she got nice fat alimony that of course would cease at his death. She must have been under considerable strain that night, to be suddenly called up and asked to come over and then find that all he wanted was for her to help celebrate a sort of wake over the corpse of his television career. Because after that broadcast, and then popping the sponsor on the jaw, it was a cinch that Tony Fagan would be blacklisted on the air waves. He knew by then that he was through, and of course he wanted to cry on her shoulder. And she came running.”

“The more fool she. She should have spat in his eye!”

Piper shrugged. “Anyway, it seems that Ruth wasn’t used to drinking—she’s the pleasant, housewifely type—and she had little or nothing in common with the entertainers and radio and television people who were there. She’d never fitted in with that crowd, which was one reason for the divorce. So in self-defense she drank more than she could handle, and instead of getting gay she got sleepy. It actually took the boys ten minutes to wake her after they discovered her in bed, and they’re pretty good at spotting fakes. Besides, there was enough concentration of alcohol in her blood when we tested it that morning to indicate that she was absolutely blotto.”

“But, Oscar, mightn’t she have knocked herself out with liquor *after* she found and covered the body, or for that matter even after she did away with ...”

“Stop leaping at conclusions, Hildegard! She had no motive. Anyway, by that time we’d found small, presumably feminine fingerprints on the outside of the door of Fagan’s apartment, which the murderer had evidently left ajar. The prints weren’t Ruth Fagan’s, they didn’t belong to any of the people who had been guests at the party earlier. It was apparent that somebody else in the building, somebody who wasn’t dead to the world like poor Ruth, must have heard the fight and come over to see what was wrong. But who?” Piper sighed. “Because the apartment underneath was vacant, being redecorated. The people upstairs were in Florida for the winter. The

only adjoining apartment belonged to a tap dancer named Crystal Joris, and the manager of the building told us that the girl had closed it up a week before and gone out to Hollywood to test for a role in a musical picture.”

“Aha!” cried the schoolteacher. “I’m away ahead of you!”

“Wrong again,” Piper told her. “We checked immediately with the Los Angeles police, and Crystal was out there all right, registered at the Beverly Wilshire.”

“Then who—”

“I decided,” said the inspector, “that the woman we were looking for must be very young and unsophisticated, probably fresh from the sticks, or else she wouldn’t have gone barging out into the hall to see what was wrong. Anybody who’d lived in New York for any length of time would have minded their own business, or at most would have called Spring 7-3100 and reported a disturbance. So, anyway, on a hunch I phoned Miss Joris long distance, finally locating her on a test stage at Mr. Zanuck’s studio. Sure enough, she admitted that she had lent the key of her New York apartment to her cousin when she stopped off for a day’s visit at her home town out in Pennsylvania on her way west. So now we find out about Ina Kell, a kid who wanted to try her luck in the big city.”

“And you mean to say that all during the hullabaloo the Kell girl had been playing possum in the next apartment, unbeknownst to your detectives?”

“She had not. Ina was playing a different game. It turned out that she’d arrived in town on a bus the previous evening, and come to the apartment after the manager had left the lobby. Little Ina went in and upstairs, using her borrowed key, unseen by anyone. But sometime next morning she made up the bed, removed all traces of her ever being there, took her bag and sneaked out. It must have been while the boys were busy inside the Fagan apartment and before anybody had time to post an extra man on the front door of the building.”

“But why would the child decamp like that? It seems out of character —”

“Wait. We had the girl’s description from Miss Joris, and a cute little redhead wandering around the city that early in the morning is as easy to trace as a circus parade. We found the coffee shop where she had breakfast, and the counterman remembered she’d been carrying a suitcase and studying the want ads while she ate. So we checked the *Rooms for Rent*

columns and that same day we picked her up, a wispy, eager, scared little girl from Bourdon, Pennsylvania, with hayseed in her hair....”

“And with stars in her eyes,” said John Hardesty dreamily, and blushed at the look the schoolteacher gave him.

“Anyway,” continued Oscar Piper, “little Ina turned out to be deeper than she looked. At first she got into a panic and denied everything, even her own name. You can’t be rough with a girl like that; it took the whole bag of tricks before I could get her to let down her hair and admit that she’d spent the night in the Joris apartment. I had to threaten to turn her over my knee and spank her before she confessed that she’d been awake and heard the fight, and had got up and gone out into the hall to see what was going on. The murderer had left the door ajar, and she peeked in and found the body. Then, according to her, she covered it up with a rug because ‘it looked so lonely and terrible and messy!’”

“Poor child! And then she tried to run away because she was afraid of being accused of the murder?”

“Wait a minute,” cut in Hardesty. “You must understand that Ina was as green as—as chlorophyll. All she knew of life was what she’d got from romantic movies and soap operas and sensational fiction. She wanted to play it heroic. Nobody could get her to admit that she’d seen Junior Gault actually leave the scene of the murder until she knew he’d already been arrested and had confessed—even though we found his gold cigarette lighter in her handbag, that he’d dropped on the scene and she’d picked up as a sort of souvenir, I guess.”

“She should have been spanked,” Miss Withers observed firmly.

“Ina claimed,” continued the assistant D.A., “and I for one believe her, that after covering the body she went rushing back into the Joris apartment to phone the authorities. But Crystal had had the phone disconnected before she left, and Ina either didn’t know it or had forgotten it. She kept trying to get the operator and of course she couldn’t. Probably the only phone she had ever seen was one on the kitchen wall, with a crank. Meanwhile outside in the hall the paper boy had looked in the half-open door and rediscovered the body, or at least the feet that were sticking out from under the rug. He sounded the alarm, and then suddenly the place was swarming with cops. She realized she had missed the boat, and ...”

“Ah!” objected the schoolteacher. “But even if the paper boy arrived just as Ina popped back into her own apartment, it still must have taken him

some time to sound the alarm, and five or ten minutes more before the police could get there. A rather long time to sit and jiggle the phone, don't you think?"

"Not for her," Hardesty said. "Don't forget she'd probably never seen a dial phone; probably she was expecting the operator to say, 'Number, please.' Anyway, when she heard the police arrive she realized that matters were out of her hands. She thought she might get into trouble for not being the one to report the body, so her only thought was to run and hide."

"A funny kid," Piper agreed. "After we picked her up she claimed that twice that morning after she had thought it over she started to call Headquarters and confess, and each time she hung up because she got cold feet. There's evidence that she did try to make a couple of phone calls in the restaurant. But down at my office she finally identified Junior Gault's photograph out of a dozen others as the man she'd seen leaving Fagan's apartment after the fracas."

"So, you see, Ina Kell is really the key witness for the prosecution," John Hardesty pointed out. "She's the one person who can actually put Gault at the scene of the murder at the right time. We didn't dare take chances with her, for fear of showing our hand. We got a signed statement, but she wasn't allowed to testify at the preliminary hearing or before the grand jury; we kept her under wraps and strictly away from the press and everybody. I got her a place to live at a nice respectable rooming house out in Brooklyn Heights; I even got her a job as a file clerk down at the Hall of Records."

"And," suggested Miss Withers hopefully, "you took her out now and then?"

Hardesty stiffened. "Oh, no. I knew then that I would probably handle the prosecution when the Gault case came to trial. It would be unethical for me to have any personal contact with a witness. Until after the trial, of course." He sighed. "Maybe I should have held her in custody as a material witness, or required her to put up a bond. But if you'd seen Ina Kell you'd realize why nothing of the kind was ever thought of. She was—different."

"I am," observed the schoolteacher, "growing more intrigued with little Ina every moment. For a simple, unsophisticated little girl from the country she seems to have done a pretty good job of winding you men around her pinky. And to top it all, she had suddenly disappeared? How and when and why?"

“She was fine and dandy,” said Hardesty, “when I last phoned her a couple of weeks ago. Just to check up, you understand, nothing personal.”

“Of course not!” Miss Withers beamed.

“Our operatives were keeping an eye on her, too, though we didn’t have men enough to spare so we could have her shadowed twenty-four hours a day. It wasn’t as if her story had got into the papers—nobody knew about her at all. And then last Monday when we tried to serve a subpoena on her, we found her gone.”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“Just gone. Quit her job and moved out of her room, the preceding Saturday. Told her landlady she’d write and give her the forwarding address, but she hasn’t. So if you can help us on this thing in any way ...” Hardesty smiled brightly. “Of course, there mustn’t be any fanfare. I don’t mind so much having it known that I let an important witness slip through my fingers, but we’re still hoping to bring her back and spring her as a surprise on the defense when the case comes up again.”

“I see,” said Miss Withers slowly. “I suppose you yourself talked to her landlady and the other roomers? Was her room searched?”

Piper nodded. “Nothing.”

“Her friends?”

“She seems to have been a shy little thing; kept pretty much to herself. No dates. When she wasn’t at the office she was either at a movie or window-shopping along Fifth and Madison or with her nose buried in a library book.”

“Probably scared stiff, and after what happened on her first day in the city I hardly blame her. I see I shall have to start from scratch. But three heads are better than one, and you gentlemen had the advantage of meeting the young lady. Mr. Hardesty, yours is the first guess. Where would you say little Ina has gone?”

The assistant D.A. paused to light a cigarette, his big hands surprisingly dexterous. “I think she’s in hiding,” he said. “Probably not far away. Ina has a powerful imagination, and I think she brooded over the impending trial until she just couldn’t stand it. She may have had a sort of long-distance crush on Junior Gault—many nice girls are fascinated by scoundrels—and she couldn’t face swearing his life away on the witness stand. Since she wouldn’t lie, and anyway could hardly retract her own

sworn statement, I think she just decided to drop out of sight until after the trial.”

“The girl would have to have a heart soft as butter, to say nothing of her head. But, very well. Oscar, what is your hypothesis?”

“I hate to say it,” pronounced the inspector, “but it’s possible she was bought off. The girl was dying to get into the big time, and maybe being a file clerk in New York wasn’t much improvement over the home town. Somebody got to her—there could have been a leak somewhere in the D.A.’s office or mine. Junior Gault, or his family, or his attorney, could have learned how important Ina’s testimony would be to the prosecution. A few thousand bucks and a plane ticket dangled in front of Miss Ina Kell ...” Piper grinned. “Maybe those stars our young friend here saw in her eyes were only star sapphires!”

“You’ll eat those words,” Hardesty said quickly, “when we find her.”

“If we find her,” put in Miss Withers. “Of course, we are all aware that there are still other possibilities. Ina might have been frightened away, or kidnapped, or even worse.”

“Relax, Hildegard,” advised Piper. “She hasn’t been murdered. The only person with the faintest motive is still safe behind bars.”

“Relax, yourself,” she countered snappishly. “And, speaking of motives, I am still far from convinced that Junior Gault really had sufficient reason to kill Fagan. Just because of a poke in the jaw, and some snide remarks on the air....”

“Well, now!” The inspector nodded genially at Hardesty. “Listen at her! And only a couple of hours ago in my office she was swearing that this time she had no intention of upsetting any applecarts. John, don’t you agree with me that this is the time for us to fix it up so Miss Withers here has a look at exhibit A?”

The assistant D.A. shrugged, but Miss Withers sat up straight. “If you’re thinking of showing me a lot of gruesome photographs of a dead body ...”

“Not at all, Hildegard. You’re going to have a look at the motive, and then you can decide for yourself if it’s sufficient or not. Know anything about television?”

She looked blank. “From what I’ve seen it’s mostly wrestlers and puppet shows and old Hopalong Autry movies seen through a blinding snowstorm.”

“Forget the good old days of the family stereoscope, will you? Time marches on.” The inspector winked at Hardesty and rose from the table. “Come, Hildegard.... Just a minute while I make a phone call, and we’ll be on our way.”

“Hmm,” Miss Withers said. “Oscar, I think you’re up to something. But I’m just curious enough to trail along.”

“You’ll get curiouiser and curiouiser,” he promised, with a too-innocent smile.



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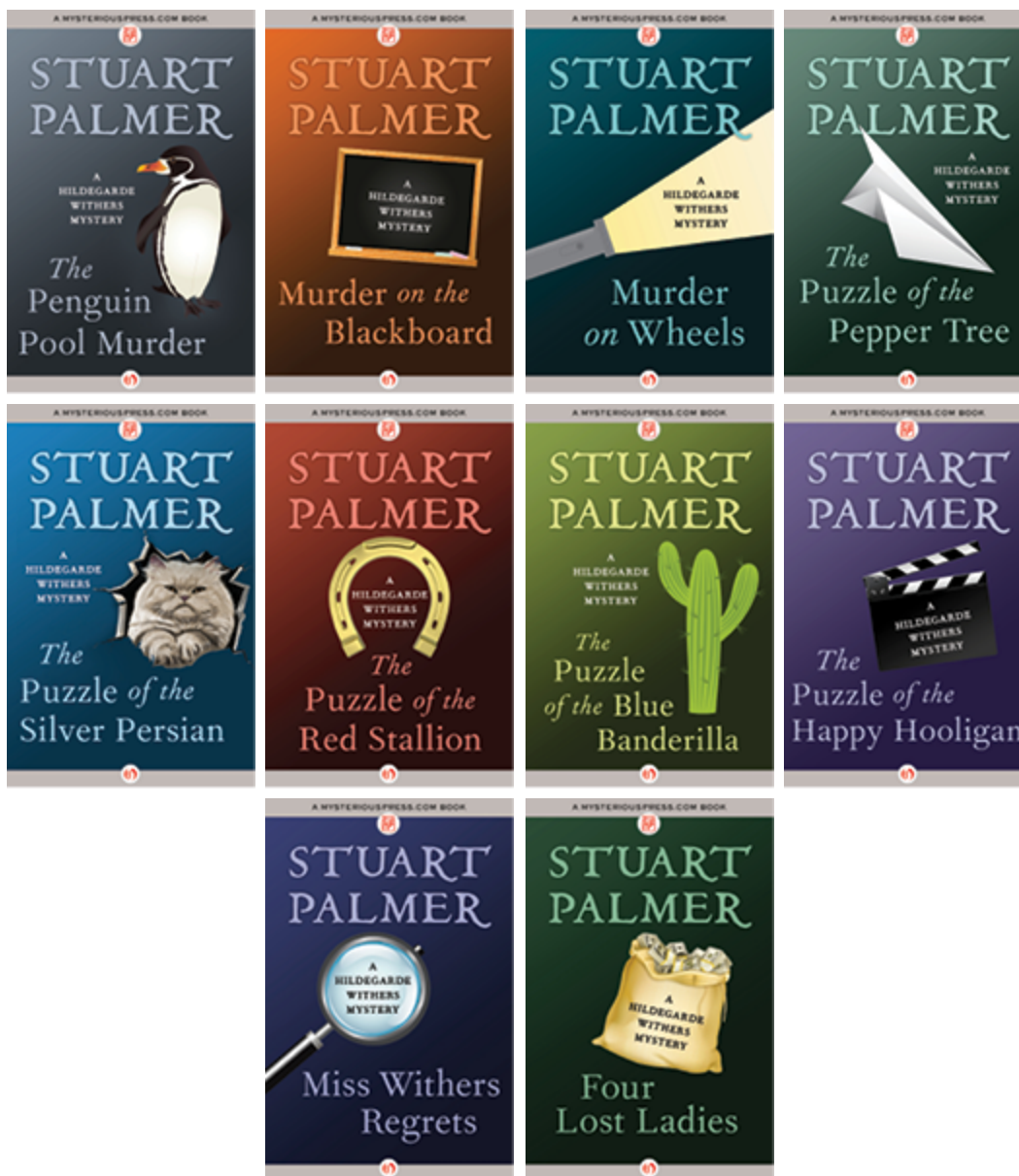
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